

The Renegades

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Summary: Following a harrowing tragedy, the U.S. Government unanimously passes the controversial Pony Registration Act (PRA), compelling every pony on American soil to be forcefully registered and interned. But in their darkest hour, ten unlikely heroes found the courage to do what to do what was right. A Marvel x DC x MLP/FIM crossover like never before.

1. Season 1, Episode 1 - The Prodigies

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." â€” Edmund Burke

****Episode 1:**** The Prodigies

"Good morning Washington D.C, and good morning America. It's May Sixteenth, nineteen fifty three, five after the hour of nine am, temperature's a balmy 90 degrees which is good news for you lucky kids ridin' flipâ€”top in your ginchi new Cadillacsâ€”|"

The grainy voice of a tube radio atop the nearby newspaper stand greeted the morning to the rising swirls of smoke from the tip of a burning cigarette resting on the corner of a clear glass ashtray. The sidewalk was alive with the tipâ€”taps of hooves worn out leather soles of average citizens in cheap suits chasing yet another day's wages in a neverâ€”ending rat race. From the soft screeching of whitewall tires upon a shiny new Cadillac blazing trails across the asphalt to the chartâ€”topping tunes of Frankie Laine, it was just another day in downtown D.C.

Even luck was a lady, and like all ladies, though, they have their good days and they have their bad days. The faint sounds of pounding fists and the enthusiastic guffaws resonating throughout the confines of a dingy back alley from behind old man Miller's corner street diner was enough to motivate even the most inquisitive of folks to remain to their side of the pavement. As the saying goes, only fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

* * *

><p>Earlier that dayâ€|

The sounds of shattered glass startled Johnny from his sleep, forcing a groan from the back of his throat from having been wrenched from his liquid dreams of Barbara Jean from next door. He shrugged at the commotion outside his bedroom, judging from the mindless bickering that his parents were arguing again for the umpteenth time. His baby blue eyes rested upon his clock. He figured that he was up a little too early, but the Hell with it. He would rather be down at Miller's waiting around for his buds to arrive than spending another Godâ€"awful moment in this Hellhole. He lifted himself off the mattress to the sounds of creaking springs, taking a moment to stretch out his aching back before making a beeline for the bathroom.

It was filthy, but he had grown used to the stench of mold and stagnant water. He would have cleaned it, but he knew it was a pointless chore, besides this pad could rot for all he cared. The morning was routine enough: shower, shave, a palm full of grease to smoothen out his thick wavy brown locks, and he was prepped to go. He threw on his only clean pair of skinny jeans, a plain black tee, a pair of worn out boots and of course his prized possession, his leather jacket. He was almost to the door before pausing, shaking his finger in realization that he had forgotten the most important thing. He grabbed something silvery under his cotton pillow and slipped it into his jean pocket.

He was almost a foot out the door when he balked midâ€"way as a whiskey glass smashed into a nearby wall. "Ya fuckin' bitch!" the elderly voice slurred. "I work my ass off day in and day out and my fuckin' wife does nothing but mooches off and spreads her fuckin' legs for any stallion she sees!"

"Oh, ya wanna go there, you fat piece of turd! What 'bout Bobbie Jo huh? What 'bout her?"

Johnny narrowed his gaze at the bald, drunken man by the kitchen counter, suckling on the half empty bottle of cheap bourbon like it was the sweet nipple of a two penny whore while he strutted around in his undergarments.

"I fucked the neighbor's nag one time, one fuckin' time and ya'll never let me forget it!"

"Ya damned right I won't let ya forget it, ya unfaithful asshole!" said the woman on the other end of the dining table. A bloated, aging broad with far too much makeup and a splashy dress on the verge of popping a button.

"Yer a freeloading little cunt, Delores, just like that useless no good bum, Johnny!" the man barked. "Life's hard 'nough without him around. Ya should've had gotten rid of him when ya had the chance!"

"Go to Hell, Jim, there ain't a day gone by where I hadn't wished that boy died the day he was born! The only reason why I'm stuck with yer sorry ass is because of him." She took another bite from her

donut. Jelly ran down her fingers and onto her dress.

Johnny felt his nowâ€"trembling hand tighten around the doorknob. He ripped the door wide open with a thud loud enough to force a shot of bourbon back up his old man's throat. "Ya know what, drop dead, both of ya! I don't need this shit. I'm outta here," he yelled, storming out the front door.

"Whaâ€" the fuck did ya just say to me? Hey, HEY! Get your ass back here boy, I ain't done with ya yet!" Jim rushed outside, stumbling over a pile of empty whisky bottles as he yelled from the steps of his porch, but Johnny refused him any attention.

Johnny threw on his jacket while he stormed down the forlorn streets of the city slums. It wasn't long before the exasperated death threats faded behind the revving engines of dump trucks on their way to the nearby cement plant. Johnny forced a grunt as he kicked an empty beer can into the air. He fished a crumpled cigarette out from his jacket pocket, shrugging upon realizing it was his last one.

Slipping the stick to his lips, he ignited it with the bronze lighter he swiped from the sorry coot he and his friends had jumped the week before. Speaking of which, he could really use their company right now. Blowing the last bit of smoke from his lungs, he eyed the city bus pulling up at the corner of Thirtyâ€"Fourth Street before making a rush for it.

* * *

><p>"Alright people, here we are," the driver said as the bus pulled up to the curb.<p>

The unmistakable aroma of waffles, toast, and coffee from his favorite hangout was as comforting as ever. No sooner did Johnny step off the bus, than was he greeted by the familiar sight of a five young men leaning against a nearby wall, tipping the ashes from their halfâ€"lit cigarettes while they watched the world go by. He grinned â€" he was finally home.

"Hey Johnny, my man!" One of them exhaled a whiff of smoke though his nostrils. "What's buzzin', cuzzin?"

Johnny weaved through the crowd of people making their way down the sidewalk, and sure enough, the few ponies among them figured it would be far safer circling around him.

"Papa, you promised that you'd take me to see old man Stan after breakfast."

Johnny raised an eyebrow at the unmistakable voice of a foal, stopping in his tracks as he turned to a family of Earth ponies leaving the diner.

"What's the hurry son? We have the whole day after all," said the grey stallion with the fedora and the black tie. The door behind him closed to the soft tinkle of a bell.

"But what if he sells the last one before we get there?" the azure foal whined. The cream colored mare beside him rustled his mane in

affection.

"Now now, Zephyr, good things come to those who wait. Be patient. I promise it'll be worth it." She nuzzled him.

"Alright Mama!" The foal smiled.

Johnny cleared his throat and spat to the curb, scowling as he eyeballed the family in question. Their kind had no business here nor were they welcomed amongst his fellow humans. In fact, they should have been spending their days confined to farms plowing fields, pulling carriages, and the rest of the dirty work low enough for the colored folk. Their smugness turned his very insides out.

As he watched the family of ponies slip into the alleyway next to diner, a grin twisted upon his face. Johnny whistled sharply to his friends by the wall. Upon exchanging glances, they grinned, flicking their cigarette butts onto the pavement as they followed him into the alleyway.

Johnny tucked his hands into his jacket pocket, eyes glaring like the big bad wolf upon a flock of unsuspecting sheep. "This is gonna to be fun."

* * *

><p>Pain, flaring pain was all the stallion felt through the vicious pounding of bareâ€"knuckled fists hooked into cheeks one after the other. The world swayed in a silent limbo, drowned by the highâ€"pitched ringing in Greyburn's ear. A gag was forced up to the grey earth pony's throat as if his guts had gone up and twisted themselves in knots the moment his stomach caved from the blow. That would have been the fifth, or sixth, he had lost count. It was a wonder that he was still conscious.<p>

Where did it all go wrong? All he ever wanted was a day away from the office, away from those mindless pencil pushers and petty office politics, together with his wife and son. It seemed like only moments ago he was savoring the scent of cinnamon waffles and the smoky aftertaste of a freshly brewed cup of Joe at his favorite diner without a care in the world.

Everything was going so well, so much so, he made a promise his son that they would stop on by old man Stan's comic book store three blocks down to pick up that new issue of Flash Gordon he had been talking about the past week. Then, perhaps down to his favorite pony florist for a bouquet â€" his wife loved the scent of Equestrian roses. But Murphy be damned, he and his family were jumped by six teenage hoodlums the moment he made the horrible decision to take a shortcut through the alley.

The stallion's weak breaths drawn through bloodâ€"clogged nostrils, were lost in the ocean of cruel guffaws and mindless egging all around him. Never once had he questioned the Lord, having been raised in a strict Christian home, such blasphemous behavior would have earned him a sore rump by day's end. _Then, why would the Lord forsake me and my family?_

"What'cha think, boys? Ya think he's had enough?" The blonde haired greaser gestured to his two snickering compatriots who dangled

Greyburn like a piñata. He inched forward for closer look but then without warning, socked another one into the stallion's muzzle.

"I don't think so!" He laughed.

Even as the stallion spat a glob of blood and saliva to the asphalt beneath him, he kept his unbruised eye on the faces of his wife and son. Despite the beatings, he thanked the Lord that they had been spared. He bit his bottom lip. This was all his fault " he was the one who insisted they take the shortcut, and he damned himself to Hell for being so stubborn. Now these " _animals_, were going to make him watch as they ripped everything he loved out of his life.

"Hope yer still hungry, 'cause there's still a whole lot more where that came from!" The greaser pulled his arm to the back as he readied himself for yet another go.

"Stop it! Stop it! Please!" Greyburn's wife pleaded through her tears, holding her foal tightly in her hooves. "I'm begging you! Please!"

Her cries did nothing to stop the onslaught of beatings, goaded to the sounds of boisterous cheering and Devilish grins. "Stop! Leave my papa alone!" Zephyr cried out, but even the voice of a young child fell on deaf ears.

"Ough!" Greyburn cried as the greaser snagged a handful of his blood-stained mane and threw him right into a pile of trashcans.

"Greyburn!" The mare's strangled cry escaped her at the sight of her husband now lying motionless on the ground.

The alley erupted in a hail of wolf whistles, applause and exchanges of high fives going all around. "Oh yeah! Who's bad? Me! Johnny B, that's who!" The greaser strutted across the alley with his hands held high.

"You got that right, Johnny!"

* * *

><p>" " you won't get away with this." Zephyr flinched as the greaser they called Johnny froze, his boots screeching against the asphalt.<p>

"What's that?" Johnny walked over before kneeling down to the foal. "Ya gotta run that by me again kid, 'cause I think I got something stuck in my ear." He tapped on his earlobe.

Zephyr scowled.

"Don't you _dare_ talk to him!" the mare spat, holding Zephyr tighter in her arms.

Johnny shot her a glare. "Hey, I ain't talkin' to ya, nag! I'm talkin' to yer boy here, so why don't ya mind yer own fuckin' business?" He scoffed, shaking his head as he returned his attention to the foal. "Jesus Christ, parents are such a pain in the ass aren't

they? Come on, tell Uncle Johnny what ya said."

"I said don't talk toâ€" AHH!" Zephyr had never known the true meaning of fear until the moment he watched Johnny wrench his mother by her auburn mane.

"Ya want me to cut ya up like the last bitch who mouthed off to me, huh? Shut the fuck up!" The rage in his eyes could have killed a small animal.

"Mama!" Zephyr cried. "Stop! Let my mama go, you're hurting her!" He darted forward and smacked his little hooves frantically against Johnny's shin.

"Hey, lookee here, boys, the kid's got some fight in him!" Johnny shot his friends a grin, drawing nothing more than guffaws and chuckles. "Dumb little ankle biter," he sneered as he flicked the foal in the forehead.

"Ow!" Zephyr fell flat on his rump, sniffing as he rubbed the sore spot with his hoof.

"Sunny! Zephyr! Donâ€™| don't you touch them!"

"Papa!" the young foal cried out as he watched his father struggle to his hooves, only have his heart sink when Greyburn took another tumble to the ground. It was no useâ€" his strength had all but deserted him.

"Pleaseâ€™|" the mare pleaded, her face streaking with tears.

A moment of silence passed before he finally released her. "Alright, alright, just 'cause ya asked me so nicely," Johnny said with a smirk, glancing over to the stallion on the ground. "Ya know, ya should be proud of ya kid. He's got a lot more balls than ya."

"Please, doâ€™| whatever you want with meâ€™| just pleaseâ€™| please don't hurt my family," Greyburn pleaded through his strained breaths.

Johnny's eye twitched as he stomped off in stallion's direction. Zephyr watched in silent horror as the enraged greaser swung the tip of his boot into Greyburn's stomach. He forced himself to turn away at the moment of impact, while his father's helpless cries clawed at his soul.

"Ya still don't fuckin' get it do ya, pops? Ya don't get to make demands here! This is my show, I'm the one with the dick here! Me, Johnny B!" Johnny swung another kick into the stallion.

"ARGH!" Greyburn's good eye screwed shut as he lay clutching his gut.

Zephyr snorted as he watched Johnny casually remove an ivory comb tucked away in his jacket pocket and smoothen out the loose strands of his hair, whistling a chirpy little tune as if everything he had done to this point was merely a game. Zephyr trembled, his eyes welled on the verge of tears, not of fear but of hatred.

Johnny's whistling came to an abrupt stop the moment his eyes connected with Zephyr's, glaring deep into Johnny's baby blue hues with the unspoken desire to drive a knife through his still beating heart.

He scoffed. "Ya know, I'm getting mighty tired of that look ya givin' me, kid."

Johnny slipped the comb back into his shirt pocket. "In fact, I'm beginnin' to wonder where all this fight is comin' from, 'cause the last one we jumped was beggin' like a little puppy dog. So, you know what, enlighten meâ€| Why aren't you afraid? Huh? Enlighten me! Enliâ€"

The sudden pause had Zephyr noticing Johnny's newfound curiosity in something between the folds of little saddlebag. As Johnny flipped off the leather top and pulled out a rather old comic book, Zephyr gasped.

"Give that back!" he cried.

"Zephyr, no!" Sunny held him back as he struggled to break free of his mother's embrace.

"It's mine, give it back!"

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Johnny's fingers traced the edges of the stained pages as his eyes traced over the title. "The Phantom Stranger? The heck is this crapâ€" It then hit him like two shots of cheap whiskey.

Johnny blurted a laugh, escalating into an uncontrollable fit as he smacked his thigh, leaving Zephyr wondering if the guy had finally lost his marbles.

One of the greasers cocked an eyebrow as he gestured to his fellow greaser. "Hey, what so darn funny?"

The other greaser bobbed his shoulders. "Beats me."

"Oh! Oh! Now I get it! Stupid, stupid Johnny boy. How did I not see it, huh?" He smacked his forehead.

The foal winched as Johnny came unnervingly close, sneering at him. "Ya actually thinkâ€| that someoneâ€| some hero's gonna come waltzing down this alley and save yer mommy and yer daddy?"

Zephyr froze.

"That's cute kid, real cute. Well, get this, I'm gonna give it to ya straightâ€| there ain't no such thing as heroes, they only exist in here," he said, tapping on the worn out cover.

Johnny gestured to the barren back alley walls around them. "Look around ya! This is the real world, and here in the real world, no one gives a fuck about ya. Not the cops, not the people, not even your own kind. Hell, even yer own daddy doesn't love you 'nough to try." He smirked, glancing over to Greyburn yet again.

Tears streamed down his cheeks, dampening his fur. "You're

_wrong_â€| " Zephyr muttered.

Johnny raised an eyebrow. "What'cha say kid?"

"I said you're wrong! Someone will come help us, you'll see! And whoever it is, I hope he kicks your buttâ€| you and your monkey friends!" Zephyr bawled through the tears.

Johnny's face scrunched with such rage, his eyeballs stood on the verge of busting a capillary. "Why ya little!" he snarled as he raised his boot.

Zephyr flinched, shutting his eyes tightly as he braced the blow to come.

"NO!" Sunny shielded her foal in her arms.

But the blow never came.

The greaser's fists were clenched as tightly as his teeth, his voice baneful as he spoke. "Ya know what, I got a better idea. Why don't I prove it to ya? Right hereâ€|." Johnny reached into his jean pocket, sliding out a chromed hilt.

The sight of it made both his parents gasp. "â€|right now."

"Bring me the kid." Evil smiles streaked across their faces, snickering as they moved in on Zephyr and his mother.

"No! Let me go! Mama!" Zephyr screamed as he was torn from his mother's embrace.

"No! NO! Zephyr!" Sunny cried after him.

"OW, FUCK!"

Zephyr bit down hard on one greaser's hand, kicking and trashing as hard as he could, but the humans were just too strong.

"He bit me! Son of a bitch bit me!" the greaser cried.

"Quit your whining, you spaz," the other snapped.

"No! Let go of my son!" Sunny made a grab for her foal, only to be shoved back into the alley wall. "Greyburn, stop them!" she sobbed.

"No! No please!" Greyburn cried as he watched Johnny dangle Zephyr by the scruff his neck like a helpless little kitten.

"So where should I start, hm?" The silver blade, as malicious as a cobra's fang, flipped into view. "Decisions, decisions, decisions." Johnny eyed the young foal, twirling his dangerous toy freely between his fingers. "Ya know what pops, I'm lost. How 'bout ya help me out here?"

"Johnny! Johnny right? Pleaseâ€| _please_, I'll do anything, anything! Just don't hurt my son," Greyburn begged. His voice quivered as he spoke.

"Then how bout we play a little game? I'm gonna let ya tell me where should I cut yer little boy. Should I cut his leg off?" Johnny circled the tip of his blade around Zephyr's shoulder. "Or one of his earsâ€¦ His nose maybe? Oh, I know! How 'bout his eyes? I _hate_ those damned things."

Zephyr could only watch as his father's lip tremble, his eyes welling with tears. "Johnny pleaseâ€¦"

"Ya better hurry, pops, cause if you go quiet on me, I'm just gonna kill the little tyke." Johnny smirked. "So tickâ€¦tock pops. Time's â€¦wastin."

Zephyr had never seen his father cry, but as the tears streamed down Greyburn's cheeks, he smiled. "Papaâ€¦ Papa it's okay."

Greyburn's ears perked. "Zephyr?"

"A hero will come save usâ€¦ you'll see, he'll come, I know he will!"

Zephyr yelped the moment he felt Johnny's grip tighten around his mane. "Ya shut the fuck up kid! _Shut up!_ What's it gonna be, old man? Say it now, or I swear to God I'm gonna spill his guts all over the Goddamned floor!" Zephyr cried as he was jerked around like a rag doll. "Okay, okay! Cutâ€¦ his hair?"

"What'cha waiting for, Johnny boy? Cut him up!"

"Do it, Johnny! Make him scream!"

Everyone was so caught in the rush of the moment that none of them had noticed a presence approaching them from the far end of the alleyway, taking with him an empty whiskey bottle sitting atop a nearby dumpster.

"Alright pops," Johnny snarled. "Have it yer way!" He brought his blade to Zephyr's throat.

"Johnny, no!" Greyburn cried out.

Zephyr shut his eyes, gasping the moment he felt the chill of steel against his neck.

The same moment, something wrenched one of the greasers around by his shoulder. "The fuâ€¦"

He never got to finish as he took the full brunt of a bottle to the face, smashing to pieces on impact but before he could give in to sleep's embrace, he was grabbed by the neck. Cold fingers with a grip like the coils of a python tightened around his throat, cutting off his windpipe before slamming him backâ€¦first into the alley wall. The greaser cried as he was stabbed in the stomach by something sharp and jagged, enough to force him to consciousness without breaking skin.

The greasers, including Johnny, stood motionless, jaws agape as they gawked at their friend who was now looking more like a bloodied jigsaw puzzle with several pieces missing. Even from afar, Zephyr kept an eye his mysterious savior. The stranger certainly looked like

the average greaser â€" a pair wellâ€"polished Doc Martin's, a pair of Levi's, and to top it off, a white Tâ€"shirt and a brown leather jacket. Though, the way he glowered at the poor, wounded soul before him proved that he was no friend of Johnny's.

"I'm gonna give you three seconds, exactly three, to put that kid down and step away from those poniesâ€" before I decide to open your friend's meat shirt here, and show him the color of his insides." The stranger forced what was left of the broken bottle deeper into greaser's stomach.

"ERRGH!"

He silently counted the seconds for a dumbfounded Johnny to find his way back to reality, but when nothing happened he cried, "ONE!"

Once again, nothing happened.

"TWO!" He shoved the bottle a little deeper into the greaser's stomach, this time twisting it for added measure.

"ARRGH!"

"ALRIGHT! Alright!" Johnny cried at last, jerking the blade away from Zephyr's neck and laying him gently on the ground. "Alright, be cool."

"Papa!" Zephyr burst into tears as he scrambled to his father.

Greyburn threw his hooves around his son and held him tightly in his arms. "Oh Zephyr, my boy, my boy. Oh, thank God."

"Greyburn! Zephyr!" Sunny cried, stumbling to her hooves to join her family in embrace.

Zephyr buried his face in his father's fur, tears once shed with sorrow now streamed with joy. He didn't know if it was a miracle, a mere coincidence or a sudden act of compassion, nor did he care. His family, his precious family, was alive.

"Youâ€" can you walk?" The stranger addressed the stallion, who was quick to nod in response.

"Careful, honey." Sunny braced herself against her husband as Greyburn forced himself to his hooves. "Easyâ€" "

"Careful Papa," Zephyr said.

"Get your family out of here, and get yourself to a hospital. Oh, and while you're at it, call the cops."

Sharp, hazel eyes narrowed dangerously at the five greasers remaining. "And if any of you punks so much as try anythin', so help me _God_â€" He twisted the bottle.

"Ergh! Oh God!"

Zephyr and his family bid a hasty retreat, and sure enough, the

greasers avoided them. The little foal glanced over his shoulder, adding insult to injury as he stuck his tongue cheekily at Johnny, drawing nothing but a bitter scoff.

"Thank youâ€¦ Thank youâ€¦ Bless you," Sunny said through her teary sobs as they passed him.

"And kid, Zephyr ain't it?" the stranger inquired all of a sudden, catching the attention of the young foal. He smiled. "Never stop believin'."

Zephyr lit up like morning sun, returning his advice with a smile and a nod before leaving with his family. As they made their way out of the dreary alley, he rubbed his cheek against his father's leg, smiling as he did.

"Seeâ€¦ I told you he'd come."

* * *

><p>The moment they were out of harm's way, the stranger released his hold on the greaser's neck, but not before grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. Jerking him forward, he rammed his knee right in the solar plexus. The greaser clutched his chest, choking on his own blood as he was thrown to the ground.<p>

"So!" he said, almost making them to jump out of their skins while he patted the dust from his jacket. "You guys think you're such hotshots, huh? Bunch of tough guys pickin' on a few ponies who can't even fight back?"

He allowed what was left of the broken bottle to slip from his fingers. "Must make you feel real good about yourselves."

"Well then." He pushed back on his short auburn hair before cracking his knuckles. "Why don't you guys try on someone with some teeth for a change instead of thoseâ€¦"

"Motherfucker!" The greaser closest to him lunged forward, throwing a wild haymaker. The stranger tilted his head back, just as the clenched fist went sailing by. The stranger crossedâ€¦ countered as his fist connected with the greaser's face, snapping both the greaser's front teeth off like twigs off a branch. "Blargh!"

The stranger easily caught the outstretched arm by the wrist just seconds before blasting another fist into the greaser's stomach, twisting it for added measure. The greaser's eyes ran red, gasping for breath like fish out of water as saliva trickled down his jaw. He twisted the greaser's arm, trapping it against his shoulder. Using it as leverage, the stranger slammed his fist into the greaser's shoulder, snapping it on impact. The greaser screamed.

"Ain't all fun and games bein' on the other end of a fist now, _is it_?" the stranger spat as he twisted the arm, increasing the weight on his shoulder as he forced yet another cry.

"Argh! Stop!"

"Why? I didn't see you and your pals there stoppin' while you guys were takin' turns beatin' that little kid's dad half to death." His

gaze fell upon the four greasers left standing. "Hey, why aren't you all laughin' like you did before, huh?" He sneered. "Have Iâ€| have I failed to entertain you? Do I not appeal to your sense of _humor?_" He twisted the arm further.

"Arrrrggghhh! Jesus Christ! Stop!"

"You guys get off to this kinda stuff don't you? So come on, you sick sons of bitches, _laugh!_" He twisted the arm again.

"Arrrrggghhh! God please!"

"_LAUGH!_"

"Hey! HEY, LET HIM GO!" Johnny hollered from across the alley, but the stranger ignored him. "Hey I'm talkin' to ya, PUNK!"

"Pound him, Johnny!" The others yelled with newfound confidence at the sound of Johnny's own.

"Yeah, cut him up!"

The stranger smirked. "What's the matter, tough guy? Losin' your moxie 'cause you're not callin' the shots anymore? Pity, you were on such on a roll, too." He twisted the arm slowly, prolonging the greaser's suffering.

"Arrgghh! Johnny, make him stop, man!"

Johnny brandished his switchblade. "I don't know what yer deal is, ya son of a bitch, but ya just done gone from an ass kickin' to a funeral. Ya walk in here, into MY ALLEY, kick the shit outta MY FRIENDS and ya think yer gonna cut outta here one piece? Well you know what, hero? I hope this is worth it, 'cause I'm seriously gonna enjoy feedin' ya yer balls!"

"Yeah!"

"You tell him, Johnny!"

The stranger responded with a slow chuckle, almost murderous to the tone. "You think I'm a hero? No, I'm no hero. I'm the guy who's gonna _beat_ you cocksuckers to death and drink your blood from a fuckin' _boot_."

Johnny forced a dry laugh. "Ya putting me on? It's fuckin' five against one."

"I think you mean _four_. " He jerked greaser's arm, on the verge of popping it out of its socket.

The greaser's cries went shrill as he dropped to his knees.

"Still, I think those are pretty reasonable odds."

The pinned greaser glanced over his shoulder, gazing into the stranger's eyes while he stammered through his breaths. "I knowâ€| who you are."

The grin curling upon the stranger's face drew an instant sense of

regret. "Really? Well, since we all love the sound of our names here, why don't you go ahead and tell your frat house friends here who I am. Come on, hotâ€"rod, say my nameâ€"|" " he said as he jerked on his arm.

"Aaaaarrgh! Fucking Hell!"

"Say it!"

The greasers gritted their teeth at the sight of their suffering compatriot, but none of them dared to move.

"Say my name!"

"Howâ€"ardâ€"| Staâ€"ark!"

"LOUDER!" he snarled, twisting it further as he threatened to tear the greaser's ligaments apart.

"AAARH! HOWARD STARK! HOWARD STARK! HOWARD STAAARK! OH GOD!"

Only then did he loosen his hold. "You're Goddamned right it is," he spat before turning to address the other four. "Tell the cops, tell the doctors, tell your grease ball friends from here to Brooklyn, 'cause when the sun goes down on this city, I want you sons of bitches to remember exactly who kicked your fuckin' teeth in as they're SCRAPING WHAT'S LEFT OF YOU OFF THE SIDEWALK!"

Howard released his hold on the greaser, making him kiss the asphalt with a boot to the back of his head. "So what'cha pussies standin' 'round for? Bring it!" He threw his arms apart.

"Waste that motherfucker!" Johnny snarled.

The three remaining greasers lunged forward like the hounds of Hell on a mission to tear the young Stark limb from limb. Howard bared his teeth, curling his fists before surging forward at full speed to meet them in the heat of battle, just as the first one was in the midst of hooking a blind right. Howard blasted his fist into the greaser's face with a brutal blow. Shifting his weight, he slugged the next one across the cheek. The punch sent the greaser stumbling to the back, painting the walls with a spray of red as he took a tumble to the ground. Howard forced the third one rump first into the asphalt with a kick to the stomach.

The first greaser's face scrunched from the pain, writhing and whining as he clutched his busted nose.

Howard stepped in with a hurricane of punches, to the face, to the chest, to the gut, to the liver, to the groin, taking swing after savage swing like a wild animal, with the snarls to match. Grabbing the greaser by his Tâ€"shirt, he smashed his forehead into the greaser's face, once, twice, feeling what was left of the man's nose turn to mush upon impact.

Howard slugged his fist into the greaser's stomach, forcing him over as he kneed him in the face, putting him down for good.

With a grunt of effort, the second greaser returned, bleeding profusely from his mouth as he swung his fist, but Howard was ready

for him. Stopping his blow midswing with his arm, he closed the distance and delivered a nasty elbow to the lips, busting them wide open.

Howard trapped the greaser's arm then blasted a hail of wild haymakers into his face with the same savagery, shattering the greaser's cheek bones and breaking his jaw. Howard backstepped, giving himself enough leeway for a foot right between the legs.

"OUGH! Mother fuâ€" The greaser's bloodied face contorted as he doubled over.

Howard grabbed him by the face, dragging the stumbling greaser down the alley and shoving him right into the third greaser, sending both of them back into the asphalt.

With two more down for the count, he homed in on Johnny B.

"Come on, pretty boy! Come on! I'm gonna fuck you up!" Johnny taunted, twirling the silver switchblade in his hand.

Howard's breaths intensified at the sight of Johnny's smirk. His nostrils flared, his eyes narrowed into slits as he cried at the top of his lungs, tearing down the alley like a man possessed. Johnny bounced excitedly on his toes, grinning as he took a swipe at the young Stark. Howard ducked at the last minute, the blade nicking a couple of strands from his head as he threw his arms around Johnny's waist, spinning around behind him and lifted him into the air.

The move caught Johnny offguard and offbalance as he was thrown into suplex, back first into the asphalt. He groaned and writhed, but before he could recover, Howard grabbed his jacket and pulled himself on top of him. Like the wrath of God given flesh, he ground and pounded the living Hell out of Johnny with the occasional head butt in between, sending splatters of blood in every direction each time his knuckles collided with skin and bone.

Howard choked as he felt an arm around his neck, suffocating him as he was wrenched off Johnny's now battered body as they stumbled backward. He grunted, baring his teeth at the sight of the third greaser, feeling his lungs begin to starve as he struggled to get loose.

"I'm gonna snap your fucking neck in two!"

"Screw you!" Howard snarled as he grabbed hold of the greaser's thumb and snapped it.

"AAAARRRH!"

Howard swung his head to the back, breaking the greaser's nose then driving his elbow right into the greaser's liver.

"OUGH!"

Howard made a grab for the greaser's collar, throwing him over the shoulder and back first into the ground. Just as he hit the floor, Howard put him out like a burnt out light bulb with a stomp of his boot right in the kisser.

Howard's breaths were heavy, his feral eyes lost in insanity as the beating of his heart pounded like a brass band against his cranium. As the anger subsided, his gaze fell on his bruised knuckles, now soaked and trickling with the blood, and at that moment, he felt a cold sweat trickle down his face as the gravity of it all began to set in. Howard merely stood there, lost in his thoughts, oblivious to the one greaser nursing his broken arm while he attempted to flee the scene.

He looked over his shoulder, eyes locked on Howard in silent prayer that his presence would go unnoticed. He was almost home free had he not been unfortunate enough to bump into something at the entrance of the alley. As he turned around, he found himself face to face with yet another young man, gasping from the terror of having recognized him.

"Joshuaâ€¦ Gunn?" he stuttered, breaking out in cold sweat. "Youâ€¦ you with Stark? You're gonna finish me? Well, fuck you man! You ain't getting me, I ain't gonna let you!"

The greaser took a wild swing with his one good arm. Joshua deflected his blow with clear, precise movements, circling the feeble punches away. Once, twice, three times, using the greaser's momentum against him. Joshua ducked another punch thrown in his direction as he weaved to the side, hooking his fist into the greaser's face. The blow snuffed the light from the greaser's eyes as he tumbled to the ground.

Joshua ran his jittery fingers over his jet black hair, coming to terms with the fact that he had indeed knocked the living daylights out of not only an unarmed delinquent but crippled to boot.

Eyes dark brown narrowed furiously in Howard's direction. "Really, Howard? REALLY?"

Howard rolled his eyes, groaning silently at the lecture to come.

"I leave you for five minutesâ€¦ five _Goddamned_ minutes, and you get into a freeâ€¦forâ€¦all! Tell me, does your idea of a balanced breakfast involve a healthy serving of knuckle sandwich on the side?" he cried, straightening his scarlet silk tie, which had come undone in the scuffle.

"You really wanna do this here? NOW?" Howard replied.

"Does it matter where we do it? Hell, we can do it in Timbuktu for all I care, and you _still_ wouldn't listen!" Joshua shrugged, noticing the blood stains on his smoky grey suit vest and the sleeve of his white shirt. "And these just came out of the cleaners too."

"So what was I supposed to do, sit around and let these fuckers turn them into glue?"

"I didn't say that, but you can't go around beatâ€¦ HEADS UP!"

Howard caught the glimmer of a silver blade in the corner of his eye, dodging backward as it missed him by the skin of his teeth. The fires

of Hell lit ablaze in Howard's eyes yet again as he retaliated. He trapped Johnny's outstretched arm and hooked his fist right into the greaser's nose. The blow sent Johnny's eyeballs rolling to the back of his skull with the snap of his neck.

Without a shred of restraint, like a piston locked in full throttle, Howard blasted his free fist into Johnny's face, pummeling him at least a dozen times. Grabbing a fistful of his T-shirt, he wrenched him forward as he kned him in the stomach.

Johnny's face contorted from the crushing pain as he stood on the brink of throwing out whatever was left in his stomach. Howard straightened Johnny's arm and snapped it in two with an elbow to the joint.

The sound of fracturing bones was drowned by a wail of agony. Howard cried, slamming his foot into Johnny's side as he tore the arm right out of its socket. He grabbed Johnny's hand as he plunged the knife deep into the greaser's shoulder, ensuring Johnny's now limp hand was still wrapped tightly around it. Johnny's eyes widened as they lay fixed on the protruding hilt, unconsciously counting the seconds to the moment the adrenaline faded.

The alley echoed with a blood curdling scream as Johnny slumped to his knees, long after his throat had given up in protest to his screaming.

"Word to the wise, you son of a bitch, if you're gonna try to cut someone with a knife, you better be bloody well ready to get cut by one, too," Howard spat.

Johnny shot him a glare. "Drop dead!"

Howard dragged the blade further down his shoulder, forcing another scream as blood began soaking through Johnny's T-Shirt.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that over all that screaming," Howard said. "You were gonna kill that kid, you piece of ass wipe, and for that, I mean to skin you alive and chop what's left of you up into little fuckin' dog treats."

Johnny chuckled through the pain lancing in his shoulder. "Ya think yer gonna get away with this, rich boy?" he sneered. "When word gets out, the coppers are gonna come get ya and I'm gonna get a kick outta watchin' them throw ya in the fuckin' slammer. Wonder how old man Stark's gonna"

Howard slugged Johnny across the face. "ARGH! FUCK!"

"You think I give a damn about my family's company? YOU THINK I GIVE A SHIT ABOUT MY NAME? FUCK YOU!" Howard seethed, socking Johnny twice across the face.

"ARGH!"

He grabbed the greaser's shirt and glared deep into his eyes. "They can arrest me, throw me in jail, lock me away for life, I don't give a FUCK!" Howard rammed his knee into Johnny's chest, forcing a gag to his throat.

"HOUGH!"

"But right here, right now, in this fuckin' alley, I swear to fuckin' God that I'm gonna make you suffer, and I'm gonna love EVERY FUCKIN' SECOND DOING IT!" Howard dragged the knife down Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny's screams echoed through the barren walls like the screams of the damned, his throat threatening to rip itself apart.

Joshua swallowed hard. "â€|Howard, that's enough."

But Howard paid him no mind, twisting the blade as Johnny's screams grew louder.

"Howard, that's _enough_â€| "

"Stop! Stop please! God, help me! Make him stop! PLEASE!" Johnny begged, tears pouring from his eyes.

"HOWARD!"

Howard froze as if the Devil had deserted him, leaving all but the horrifying sight of blood soaked fingers and Johnny's pathetic, childâ€like whimpering. It dawned upon him, there was no question, no doubt, not even a shred of hesitation. He was going to kill him and not even the divinity of God was going to stop him.

Then why did I stop?

Johnny shrieked as Howard shot him a glare. "I want you to remember this, you punk. It is by my grace that your head is still on your shoulders and not mounted on my wall, _understand_?"

Johnny nodded frantically through the tears as Howard inched closer.

"Now go fuck yourself." He rammed his knee right into Johnny's face, knocking him out cold.

Howard cleared his throat and spat at the nowâ€unconscious greaser. Though, as he turned to Joshua, he was met with a cold, piercing gaze. "What?"

Joshua was about two seconds from raising Hell on earth when he noticed the faint sounds of sirens approaching in the distance. "Shit, I don't know 'bout you, but I'm sure as Hell not sticking around for the heat... let's get out of here," he said, turning to leave.

A moment of silence befell the young Stark as he took a moment to gaze upon the carnage he had left in his wake.

"Right behind you."

* * *

><p>The sounds of mechanical grindings accompanied by the rattling of chains echoed throughout the hangar as metallic doors large enough for an aircraft parted, with ample space enough for two. The fading

rays of day's end cast two shadows across the concrete floor amongst the myriads of workbenches, pieces of heavy machinery and gym equipment laying in their designated corners across the facility. The industrial area, formerly a military base on the outskirts of city made it the ideal place to set up camp. It was quiet, secluded and no one, not even a man with a badge, would dare show his nose here risking a lawsuit without a warrant. All, perhaps but for two young men whose last names just so happened to be plastered on the signboards outside.<p>

Stark & Gunn, rivals in business but partners in crime as far as the press was concerned. Howard tucked his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, having noticed that Joshua had been unusually quiet throughout the entire car ride. In fact, he had been unusually sullen since their little rumble downtown. His hazel eyes shifted uncomfortably to the side, desperately trying to catch even the slightest expression on Joshua's face but to no avail, even as the soulful voice of Nat King Cole playing on the radio came into earshot.

"OH, oh! Now I get it," Howard exclaimed all of a sudden. "I see what you're doin'. You're givin' me the ole silent treatment."

"Get bent, Howard, I'm not in the mood," Joshua replied.

"Look, if you still got your pajamas in a twist over those fuckin' greasers from before, I told you, I didn't have a choice. It was either them or the ponies."

"Goddammit Howard, you always say that, but that's not what's bugging me right now."

"Well what is it then? Come on, be straight with me for once!"

Joshua scoffed. "Do you have your head so far up your ass that you forgot the part where you almost brutally murdered six guys? And if that's not enough, you had to go ahead and traumatize one of them with your Jack the Ripper routine! Heaven only knows what you would have done if I hadn't stopped you!"

"So the Hell what? That son of a bitch had it comin', and you know it," Howard said.

"Well it certainly doesn't give you the right to go all Al Capone on him. Come on Howard, we're supposed to be better than this!"

Howard shot him a glare. "I don't have the right? Alright, Josh, you wanna talk about rights? You wanna talk about fuckin' rights?"

"Oh, no, no, do not pull that crap. You're not swinging this shit back at me!" Joshua interjected but Howard continued nonetheless.

"Ever since that bill was passed, thousands of ponies, _American citizens_, are being hunted down like fuckin' dogs and shipped off into internment camps to the glorious applause of every racist _fuck_ in America. Where the fuck were their rights, Josh? Gone, right out of Uncle Sam's ass and down the fuckin' toilet, that's where! So don't you dare talk to me about fuckin' rights!"

"And you believe you can make that _all_ go away by going around beating up a bunch of punks high on motor oil?"

"Well it's better than sitting here with our hands in our pants like a bunch of fuckin' beat cops! 'Sides, I think we'd have better luck cleanin' up the streets with a baseball bat and a nail gun!"

"You know what, you Goddamned psychopath, you're way outta line, and I have every mind to turn you in!"

Howard lashed out, grabbing Joshua by the collar of his shirt. Joshua in turn grabbed onto Howard's wrist. "Do it, DO IT! I'll put you in fuckin' ground like the rest of them!" His eyes narrowed.

Joshua barred his teeth. "Come on tough guy, make my day."

"We interrupt this program to bring you breaking news from the heart of D.C. as America responds to the controversial Pony Registration Act passed in congress four months ago. Here is what Vice President Robert Kelly has to sayâ€|"

The words 'Pony Registration Act' had them turning their heads to the crackling voice from the redwood radio atop the workbench.

"My fellow Americans, first of all, allow me to apologize on behalf of our President, who is unable to stand before you today as he recovers from his ordeal. As of now, we have every reason to believe that after a thorough investigation and a written confession, the recent assassination attempt on the life of President Eisenhower has come under orders by the Royal House of Equestria"

Both Howard and Joshua froze.

"I must now, with a heavy heart, declare that the threat of war is once again upon us. Not from the Germans, not even from the Russians or the Koreans, but from Equestria. A land that once prided itself on neutrality and peace now seeks to destroy our very way of life, but even so, we will not submit, we will not falter. If America requires we take up arms once again to defend our great nation, to fight for our liberty and our right to live on as free men then, as God as our witness we will stand and fight. These are dark times indeed, but I beseech you America, I ask that you stand strong, stand united and together we will persevere. They say that the night is darkest before the dawn, and I promise you, the dawn is coming."

"In light of this recent tragedy, the United States Government has taken additional measures to have the Pony Registration Act fully enacted and enforced in the months to come. The controversial act which requires all ponies â€" unicorn, pegasi, and earth pony to be registered and be moved immediately into Internment Camps located across the United States, has drawn mixed criticisms from the people of America. Texas and Alabama have already begun enforcing the law with many other states expected to follow suit."

_"Riots have broken out in heart of San Francisco and New York due to clashes between ponies of the antiâ€"registry movement and antiâ€"pony activist groups, ending with hundreds wounded and arrested by the local law enforcement. Ever since the assassination attempt, views of the general public against the ponies have dipped

exponentially. Here is what Mister Ruckus Bernstein, a former world war two veteran has to say:—

—"I don't want them ponies here. They're a dangerous element. There ain't no way to determine their loyalty, and it makes no difference whether a stallion is an American citizen, he is still a pony! American citizenship does not necessarily determine loyalty!"—

—"In other news, millionaire Ambrose Osborn of OsCorp and Adam Queen of Queen Consolidates have expressed their support for the bill, even going as far as to openly declare their financial and moral support for Anti—"Pony Activist groups like The Church of Humanity and Humanity's Last Stand. The move was also backed by millionaire inventor Bolivar Trask of Trask Industries, who has just recently made headlines at the launch of the Twenty Ninth Stark Expo, a month ago with the premier and demonstration of his new prototype under development of the Sentinel Program."—

—"In a recent interview, Bolivar stated that the Sentinels are a last resort, and will only be deployed should the ponies refuse to cooperate with the United States Government. However, not all of America's wealthiest are in favor of the new law. Millionaire inventors Howard Stark Senior, owner of Stark Industries and Christopher Gunn, owner of Gunn Enterprises have expressed their disapproval for the bill, calling it depraved, unconstitutional and 'un—"American'. We however, were unable to reach Nolan Wayne of Wayne Industries in Gotham City for any further comment."—

Howard released his hold on Joshua's shirt before stomping off in the direction of the radio.

—"That was Lana Lane with the latest report, and now we bring you a brand new one from rising star, Elvis—"—

Howard yelled as he shoved everything off the table. The clanging of tools echoed throughout the hangar to the buzzing of a silenced radio as it sprawled across the concrete floor. "Can you believe that fuckin' BULLSHIT? DAMMIT! Those smug political MOTHERFUCKERS!" Howard slammed his fist the table top.

"HEY! I just fixed the damned thing!" A voice came from above the scaffoldings a storey above belonging to a young man in a dirty white shirt, practically covered from top to toe with patches of motor oil and grease.

"Sorry 'bout that Norman, ole Howard here's throwing another one of his legendary hissy fits," Joshua noted.

"I'm not having a hissy fit."

"Tell me about it, I heard you guys from across the hangar," Norman made his way to the end of the scaffolding before sliding down the metal ladder to the ground below.

He wiped his hands across his black trousers and smoothed out the tangles in his auburn hair. "Then again, if I had to listen to them make a hero outta my dad, I'd probably go ballistic too. With him harping on human superiority and all that racial 'White Power' jazz every second of the day on live radio, it's a miracle I'm not sleeping with the fishes in a pair of concrete shoes. Damn, sure

sucks to be an Osborn right now." Norman shrugged as he reached for the scattered tools.

"Don't beat yourself up. Your dad's making a circus monkey out of himself at his own accord," Joshua said.

"Yeah, anyways, which one of you is going to clue me in on what happened, hhm?" Norman asked, pushing his thick framed glasses further up the bridge of his nose. "Let me guess, some guy went ape 'cause he thought Howard was trying to cut out with his girl."

Joshua shrugged. "Actually, Howard got into another hoedown with a bunch of greasers beating on a couple of ponies."

Norman paused. "Wow, should have seen that one coming. Anyways, again? Heck, _Howie_, if I had a vote for every time you tried to play hero, I'd be President."

"Hey get bent, pointdexter! They left me no choiceâ€¦ and what did I tell you 'bout callin' me that?" Howard snapped.

"Well that was what you said about those Ruskis, those gryphons, those minotaurs, those jocks, and those H.L.S. goons before thatâ€¦"

Howard curled his fists. "You love keepin' count, wise guy? Alright, let's see if you remember to count the stars when I ram my fuckin' fist up your gut!" He stepped forward, but was stopped in his tracks when Joshua stepped in.

"Hey, hey, hey! Back off, Howard!" Joshua said. "You know what, you need to cool the Hell off before I do it for you."

Howard snorted, turning away as he slapped his hands on the metal dividers standing between him and a multitude of different cables, tubes and wires snaked across the hangar floor. All of them connected to what appeared to be two titanic structures at least fifteen feet tall, towering over him as they lay shrouded in white tarps.

"So, any luck?" Joshua asked.

Norman merely shook his head. "Jarvis and Saria are in place, the engines purr like kittens and the hydraulics and gyros work like a charm, but trying to achieve a kinetic speed equivalent to that of a human body... well, it's a little complicated."

Howard rolled his eyes as he groaned. "What's so complicated about that? Just soup up the energy output to get more juice into the main capacitors."

"Energy isn't the problem here, Howard, we have plenty of power, but the amount of stress it will put on the mechanism will be monumental, the whole thing will literally tear itself apart!" Norman said.

"How about we switch out the hydraulics for the Starktech Hyper Torque drivers?" Joshua suggested.

Norman forced a dry laugh. "You do know those are experimental prototypes, right? The only two in existence since the military

pulled the plug because it was too expensive to mass produce back in the war? Might as well have me to use the ones from Gunn Tech too, while you're at it."

Joshua shrugged. "I just thought it'd be worth a shot."

"Believe me I've considered it, but there aren't enough tests, enough data to convince me that the drivers won't simply just overload and explode upon activation! I'm sorry guys but, I'm gonna need more time," Norman said.

"Well news flash Norman, time is somethin' we sure as Hell ain't got!" Howard pounded the railing before turning around. "You heard the news, the moment Trask fires up those 'Sentinels' it'll be huntin' season all over America, and you'd have to be a fuckin' idiot to believe the ponies will go quietly. There'll be blood in the streets and those politicians will probably be sitting on their asses placing bets on the body count!"

Norman pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm working as fast as I can but your designs can only get me so far, Howard. Without the proper testing, without the proper torque calibrations, those things are walking death traps. So don't you go blaming me if you have to start learning how to piss outta your ass!"

"Well that's not fuckin' good enough!"

"Well then drop dead, Howard! Putting up with your immature _bullshit_ is not what I signed upâ€"!"

"Enough! Both of you, JESUS CHRIST!" Joshua yelled.

Howard cried through clenched teeth, hammering his fist on the railing yet again.

"Look, I know that you're angry, I know that you're pissed the _fuck_ off, but taking it out on us isn't going to make you feel any better, and it sure as Hell isn't going make things go any faster." Joshua moved over to where he stood and placed a hand upon his shoulder. "We're not the enemy here, in fact, none of us would even be here if we didn't want to."

Howard shrugged. "You're rightâ€" I'm sorry. I guess sometimes, I find myself wonderin' if what we're doin' here would actually make a difference in this world and not just a bunch of crazy kids chasin' a dream."

Joshua chuckled before folding his arms and leaning his back against the railing. "Speak for yourself... this was your idea."

"Heh, right in the balls, huh? It's just that all my life I've been made to believe that this country stood for so much more. Honour, justice, liberty and all that hooâ€"ha about the 'American Way'. Hell, my dad's a patriot through and through," Howard said.

"But then, a pony tries to assassinate the president, and all that cock and bull 'bout how 'all men are created equal' goes out the window faster than a jackrabbit on fire. I know that humans and ponies have never truly seen eye to eye but, no one deserves to be made fugitives in the very place they were born, 'specially not by

the very people they put in congress."

Norman placed the tools atop the table, his gaze settling on Howard as he continued.

"Worse are these Church of Humanity and Humanity's Last Stand sons of bitches comin' along, eggin' the people into taking the law into their own hands while the cops are either too indifferent or corrupt to stop them."

"Amen to that, but the people are just afraid, Howard, you know that. Not to mention, it's only going to get worse with that all that crazy talk about war," said Joshua.

"Damned if they weren't, but I'll tell you one thing. Those ignorant bastards can go on pretendin' the world's all sunshine and rainbows, but I sure as Hell won't stand by and watch as this Act destroys everythin' Uncle Sam stands for," Howard said, his hand gripping tightly on the metal bar. "'Cause unless that bill is repealed, every political ass wipe in congress better hold onto their seats 'cause I'm gonna give them a war they would not believe."

"Whoa there hero, be sure to save some for us," Norman said with a chuckle as he picked up his busted radio.

Howard then turned to face him. "Hey, I'm sorry 'bout your radio. Look I'll get you a new one."

"And throw this baby out? Hell no, this here's a family heirloom," Norman said as he brushed the dust from the wooden radio.

"You kiddin' me? It's junk!" Howard shot back.

"Well, sometimes you just gotta learn to appreciate the classics. 'Sides, a few good tweaks and some lacquer and it'll be as good as new," Norman added. "Speaking of whichâ€|"

Both Howard and Joshua raised an eyebrow at Norman's sudden change of tone.

"There's this new bar downtown. A little pony told me the owner's a nice guy, and I figured since we've been long overdue for some time off. We should head on down there tonight. Blow off some steam, take our minds off everything, you know, have fun."

"This ain't gonna be like the last bar you took us to, right?" Howard crossed his arms.

"Yeah, especially when we had to mop the floor with those jocks a day before the big game. Hell, I don't think coach will ever forgive us for that," Joshua added.

Norman waved his arms. "No, no, just hear me out for a second. Alright, here's the thing, I heard that this bar is openlyâ€|integrated."

"Integrated?" Joshua asked first.

"As in, _integrated_, integrated?" Howard asked second.

"Eeyup, the owner lets in both humans and ponies. Heck he even lets in them colored folk in. It's kinda behind closed doors for people who don't really mind hanging out with allâ€sorts. So, what'cha say?"

The two friends exchanged glances with Howard rolling his eyes at the sight of Joshua charming grin. "Alright, fine. But if we run into any trouble, I'm officially never takin' bar suggestions from you ever again," Howard warned.

"Aw, and just a moment ago you were so eager to clean up the streets," Joshua said with a smirk.

"Go jump off a cliff Josh, but in the meantime," Howard said, "how about I give you a hand with those calibrations?"

Norman chuckled. "As if I could afford to turn down an extra pair of hands."

Howard glanced over at Joshua. "You comin'?"

He grinned. "Right behind you."

[To be continuedâ€|]

2. Season 1, Episode 2 - The Doctor

centeremThose who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves. â€ Abraham Lincoln/em/centercenter

>p class="indented double" p

>p class="indented double"strongEpisode 2:strong The Doctor/p

>p class="indented double" p

>center

>p class="indented double"em"There is no escape."em/p

>p class="indented double"His lungs burned, straining to gasp in enough air. His deep ebony eyes darted around the dank abyss, searching for any sign of his pursuer. Only the dim circles of light from the disembodied bulbs overhead guided him. He had no idea who or what was chasing him, nor did he know why. All he knew was he had to escape.p

>p class="indented double"em"The darkness beckons. It calls to you."em/p

>p class="indented double"The lights faded as he passed them, swallowed by the sound of monstrous wings drawing closer with every frantic step he took. The lights ahead began disappearing, one after another.p

>p class="indented double"em"No, NO!"em He glanced back the way he came, seeing nothing but darkness. A strained cry escaped him the moment the last light faded from sight and he tumbled blindly into the void as he lost all sense of footing./p

>p class="indented double"em"Why must the weak perish while the wicked continue breathing?"em/p

>p class="indented double"A splash echoed in the darkness, and something cold seeped through the fabric of his trousers. He coughed, spitting repeatedly in a bid to rid his mouth of the foul metallic taste. As he floundered blindly, a light shone overhead. It should have been a relief, but instead, it sent chills down his spine. His throat ran dry, and the heat deserted his body.p

>p class="indented double"It was blood.p

>p class="indented double"His eyes widened into white as he smothered himself, stifling the urge to scream at the sight of an ocean of corpses as far as the eye can see. Their blank soulless gazes staring deep into his own, envying the very heart that beats in his chest.p

>p class="indented double"em"Rivers of blood and mountains of corpses will not stand in your way."em/p

>p class="indented double"He jumped at the unmistakable sound of wings hidden somewhere in the veil of shadows. He bit his bottom lip, understanding the futility of it all as he resigned himself to his fate. It was coming. It was coming and he was powerless to stop it.p

>p class="indented double"em"Justice will be servedâ€|"em/p

>p class="indented double"His eyes shifted skywards to the sounds of shattering glass, drawing a strangled gasp at the monstrous batâ€"like creature descending toward him. It barred its salivating fangs, screeching like the screams of the damned before erupting into an ocean of bats.p

>p class="indented double"He screamed as he was engulfed in a whirlwind of high pitch screeching, swirling with sounds of thousands of wings all flapping in unison. He sunk to his knees, eyes screwed shut, throwing his hands over his ears as he begged for this nightmare to end. The world around him soon faded to black, but even in the depths of nothingness, he heard the gentle caress of a whisper.p

>p class="indented double""Thomasâ€| wake up."p

>p class="indented double"It echoed and faded into the shadows.p

>hr

>p class="indented double""Argh!" Thomas cried as he was jolted from his sleep.p

>p class="indented double"As always, it took him a full minute to compose himself. His fingers massaged his temple as his mind shimmered with vague images from the final moments of that dream. Ever since that unfortunate incident in the garden, his nights were never the same, and for years, it had tormented him in his sleep. Thomas groaned, doubly sure that his continuous delirium would soon drive him to the brink of insanity. Not to mention, sleep was a rare commodity for a man in his profession.p

>p class="indented double"Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he got up from his tanned leather chair. He ran his fingers through his shabby black hair before giving his aching body a wellâ€"deserved stretch, feeling the stiffness in his muscles begin to subside. With recent influx of patients, they had him running around clock a little too often for comfort. Not to mention, he had used whatever time he could scavenge to focus on his research.p

>p class="indented double"He straightened his white coat and his grey tie. Tardiness was almost nonâ€"existent to the doctor, although he had to admit, right now, he was a complete and utter mess. No surprise, after having spent his third day in a row at the hospital neck deep in paperwork and books.p

>p class="indented double""Ugh," Thomas groaned at the appalling sight of his office. Scattered with scrunched up paper, trash and a myriad of halfâ€"opened medical books on pony anatomy upon his desk. He reached for his trusty notebook before proceeding to skim through the penned pages filled with a treasure trove of medical notes accompanied by detailed pencil sketches to match.p

>p class="indented double"emNope, nope, nope, ugh! Another dead end!em/p

>p class="indented double"He slammed the book shut, silently cursing

and at the same time wishing that the hospital had considered expanding their library instead of putting in a game room for those useless pricks who would rather be spending their hours contributing to their cholesterol levels than caring for their patients. He pinched the bridge of his nose " just thinking about it was an invitation for an oncoming migraine.p

>p class="indented double"Turning around to face the window, Thomas pushed aside the green curtains. His eyes squinted from the glare of the bright morning rays. Even at ten floors off the ground, he could hear the bustling of the streets below. From the muffled sounds of hoof and footsteps going about the busy streets to the roaring of engines in the midst of traffic. His eyes shifted skyward to the sight of dozens of pegasi zipping through the skies as they went about their business. All in all, just another day in downtown Washington D.C.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas placed his hand over his chest as he noticed his elevating heart rate. His mind was in pieces, preoccupied with thoughts of that strange dream. What did it all mean? Thomas touched his forehead to the glass, feeling the warmth of the sun on his skin as he tried to make sense of it all, but the more he lingered on his thoughts, the more he inspired questions rather than answers.p

>p class="indented double""Ah! To Hell with it!" he cursed under his breath, tossing his notebook aside as he headed for the door. As much as he would love to ponder on his slow, steady descent into madness, he had a job to do. He opened the door that led to the bustling hallway and no sooner was he two steps outside, he bumped into a petit young nurse dressed in her standard issued uniform with her auburn hair tied neatly in a bun.p

>p class="indented double""I'm sorry, I'm sorry I didn't see you!" she cried.p

>p class="indented double""No, no, it's quite alright. The fault is entirely my own," he replied with a gentle smile.p

>p class="indented double"Her emerald green eyes widened as large as dinner plates, realizing who he was. "Oh, I'm so terribly sorry Doctor Wayne. I'm such a klutz sometimes."p

>p class="indented double"Thomas chuckled. "Martha, we've been through this. Please, call me Thomas" or Tom, whichever you like best."p

>p class="indented double""I couldn't possibly" I mean" it wouldn't be proper," she stuttered, fidgeting as she hugged her clipboard close to her chest.p

>p class="indented double""Proper?" Thomas asked.p

>p class="indented double""I mean, you" being a Wayne and all."p

>p class="indented double"Thomas rolled his eyes. It has been a full year since he arrived and the staff were still bent on groveling at the mere mention of his name. "Martha, I may be a Wayne, but I'm just like you, a human being. Punch me, I bleed."p

>p class="indented double""Oh, I wouldn't dare!" she blurted, her face growing redder with every passing second.p

>p class="indented double"The doctor raised an eyebrow. "Are you alright? You look completely flustered, hope you're not coming down with something. Heaven knows, hospitals can be a breeding ground for all sorts of germs."p

>p class="indented double""Actually, I'm feeling fine Doctor Way" I mean, Thomas, truly!" she blurted.p

>p class="indented double""Miss Kane, relax, take a deep breath then breathe normally. Contrary to printed media, I'm actually quite tame." Thomas chuckled yet again.p

>p class="indented double"Martha Kane, one of Knightfall General's more talented nurses and also the first to warm up to him, despite all the hullabaloo about him being branded Gotham's favorite son.p

>p class="indented double""Ugh," Thomas muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose the moment he felt a little lightheaded.p

>p class="indented double""Oh dear, another allâ€"nighter?" Martha inquired.p

>p class="indented double""No reason for concern. Nothing an aspirin can't fix. Besides, I'm a regular night owl anyway." Thomas shook the dizziness from his head.p

>p class="indented double"He then noticed Martha's charming grin. "Something amusing, Miss Kane?" he inquired, curiously amused himself.p

>p class="indented double""Well, it's just thatâ€" you know, when you first got here, I never thought that a Wayne would be soâ€" well, dedicated to his work," she said.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas pouted. "Are you trying to imply that just because I'm a Wayne, I'm socially compelled to be a drunk, spendthrift, womanizing pig? Like a scalpel through the heart, Miss Kane." He patted his chest.p

>p class="indented double""Unfortunately, you wouldn't be the first. I just want you to know that I'm impressed," she simpered with a chuckle.p

>p class="indented double""Well, it's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me."p

>p class="indented double""True, it seems that the only thing that outweighs your enthusiasm is your concern for your patient," Martha added. p

>p class="indented double""Yeahâ€" patient," Thomas muttered, trailing off as his gaze fell to the moving silhouettes reflected on the window next to him.p

>p class="indented double"Martha sighed as she placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You know, she's lucky to have you. Everyone calls her a lost cause but not you. Sometimes I believe the only thing that keeps her going is the fact that there's still someone in this wretched world who still believes in her."p

>p class="indented double"Thomas shrugged. "I'm trying Martha, Heaven knows I'm trying, but there are times that even I find myself standing at the edge of my hope."p

>p class="indented double""I understand. The poor dear, she's so young and it breaks my heart to see her in so much pain. Is there truly nothing we can do?" Martha asked, the sadness was apparent in her voice.p

>p class="indented double""I wish I knew. Any information on her condition is almost nonâ€"existent. Even with what I've gathered over the past months, it'll still be like trying to find a needle in a haystack."p

>p class="indented double"Martha turned away. "The world isn't fair."p

>p class="indented double""It never was, and it never will be but I promised myself that as long as I am able, I'll never stop looking for a cure." Thomas tightened his fists. "But I'm running out of time."p

>p class="indented double"Martha smiled. "I believe in you, Thomas. Wayne or not, if anyone can find a cure it's you."p

>p class="indented double"Thomas drew a smile at the corner of his mouth. "You haven't given up on me?"p

>p class="indented double""Never, and neither should you."p

>p class="indented double"Thomas felt a sense of warmth wash over him

as he held her hand, clasping it gently upon his shoulder. "Thank you Martha. You have no idea how much that meant to me."p

>p class="indented double"Martha's cheeks lit up in bright scarlet as her nervous gaze fell on the doctor's shoulder.p

>p class="indented double"Realizing this, Thomas swallowed hard as he jerked his hand away. Both of them soon slipped into an awkward silence, turning away to avoid eye contact, but more so to hide the fact that they were now both completely flustered.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas broke the silence by clearing his throat. "Anyways, I've kept you from your duties long enough. Besides, I most certainly don't want you getting into any more trouble with Nurse Jackie. Now if you'd excuse me, I have my patient to tend to." He turned to leave.p

>p class="indented double""Certainly. So, I guess I'll see you around?" Martha chimed.p

>p class="indented double""How about we do lunch?" Thomas turned around, ignoring the sudden hail of curses flung in his direction as he walked blindly, backâ€"first, into the oncoming crowd. "I heard its mac and cheese day today!"p

>p class="indented double""That sounds great. Oh! I almost forgot, Detective Gordon's in the main lobby. Seems like he's having a bad day," she said.p

>p class="indented double"emDetective Gordon? As in Bill Gordon?em/p

>p class="indented double"The very sound of that name made Thomas groan on the inside, well aware that his presence will always be graced by people who are either dead or somewhere in between.p

>p class="indented double""He's a detective, bad days are part of the job description!"p

>p class="indented double""Anyways, I'll see you later Dr. Wayâ€" I mean Thomas, good luck!"p

>p class="indented double"emYeah, I'm going to need it.em/p

>p class="indented double"The lobby was alive with the sound of boisterous chatter which was unusual on a Friday morning. So much, in fact, that Thomas found it hard to separate the trivial conversations from the heartâ€"breaking wails of despair, made worse by the hazy announcements over the hospital intercom. The rubber soles of his brown loafers squeaked against the polished chequered floors next to the frantic clip clops of hooves as he weaved his way through the ocean of patients and medical staff rushing through and from the hallways.p

>p class="indented double""Outta the way, patient coming through!" a paramedic yelled from behind, almost running the young doctor over, had he not stumbled out of the way.p

>p class="indented double""Hey, watch it!" he cried after them.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas was no stranger to the urgency of an emergency, but that came a little too close for comfort. He carefully eyed the frantic group of five race the bloodied torso of a human patient away in a metal bedframe seconds before vanishing around the next corner. Thomas shook his head. It was just a glance, but he knew a dead man when he saw one.p

>p class="indented double"emThose wounds, they looked like gunshots. Wonder if Gordon had anything to do with that?em/p

>p class="indented double""Doctor Wayne!"p

>p class="indented double"emSpeak of the Devil.em/p

>p class="indented double"The husky authoritative voice drew his attention to the man with a trimmed porno moustache dressed forlorn earthy trench coat standing by the registry counter. He was middle aged, possibly in his midâ€"forties judging by the grey strands in

his well combed dirty blonde locks. He gave a toast with the paper cup in his hand as Thomas approached him.p

>p class="indented double"Morning, Detective Gordon, rough day?" Thomas inquired.p

>p class="indented double"The sound of his groan was confirmation enough. "Tell me 'bout it Doc, take your eyes of the street for one Goddamned second and all Hell breaks loose. Take a good look over there," he grouched, pushing up on his thick ebon framed glasses as he gestured to a grieving family of six.p

>p class="indented double"They just lost their only son, Ivy Leaguer, would've graduated Harvard next year," Gordon said.p

>p class="indented double"What happened?"p

>p class="indented double"Shot into next Tuesday, that's what. Apparently, he was at a H.L.S. rally when

youâ€"knowâ€"whoâ€"withâ€"theâ€"mask showed up and turned the whole freaking place into a warzone. Hell, we haven't even finished counting the bodies, but from what I can tell we've got at least thirty dead and twenty more on their way to the Pearly Gates."p

>p class="indented double"Youâ€"knowâ€"who? You mean the Punisher?"p

>p class="indented double"Gordon flinched. "Shhhh! I see that you're in the know, but I'd be careful to keep that name on the low right now, Doc," he warned.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas swallowed the lump in his throat. "Noted."p

>p class="indented double"The detective rubbed his temple. "Believe me, I have enough trouble as it is without some masked, gunâ€"toting psychopath running around town taking out H.L.S. and C.O.H. members like it's Goddamned hunting season." Gordon took a sip from his paper cup.p

>p class="indented double"Coffee, straight black, and judging by the rising steam and the distinctive earthly aroma, Thomas deduced it came fresh from hospital cafeteria not ten minutes ago. "Not to mention, I've got the Police Commissioner so far up my ass that if he spits, it's coming out of my mouth."p

>p class="indented double"emI could have lived my entire life without that image in my head.em/p

>p class="indented double""I take it you're the one in charge of the task force?" he asked, hoping that the detective would cater to his curiosity.p

>p class="indented double"Gordon chuckled. "You're sharp one. I'll give you that. Truth be told, we've spent weeks tracking that bastard down, almost had him once too. He's a slippery one, but mark my words, we'll get him," he added.p

>p class="indented double"emLike I haven't heard that one beforeâ€"em/p

>p class="indented double""I have no doubt," Thomas said. The sarcasm was subtle, but apparent. "Well, I must admit I'm surprised to know that you're still here, Detective. Knowing that the Punisher was behind this, I would assume that you'd be out there trying to take him down."p

>p class="indented double""I would, that's if I didn't have to bring emtheseem yahoos in." Gordon pointed at six beds stacked behind him./p

>p class="indented double""Whoaâ€" the young doctor muttered at the sight of six unconscious greasers as they lay sprawled upon thick, bloodâ€"soaked sheets. "Whataâ€" the Hellâ€" happened to them?"p

>p class="indented double""If you're expecting me to say car accident, you're gonna be disappointed. You'll find the full report in here." Gordon said, passing over a brown file.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas gave him a long, level stare. "Should you really be giving me that, Detective?"p

>p class="indented double"Hey, you helped us out on the Zsasz case and that puts you way up in my books. 'Sides, since you're already here, I figured, what the heck?" Gordon said, bobbing his shoulders as he drew a smirk.p

>p class="indented double"The doctor shook his head. "Hand it over then."p

>p class="indented double"Taking the file in hand, Thomas proceeded to skim through the stapled pages only to scrunch his eyes at the horrible penmanship littering their medical profiles. He groaned at the sight of the signature at the bottom left corner.p

>p class="indented double"emDoctor Hugo Strange, why am I not surprised? Only he would have such atrocious handwriting.em/p

>p class="indented double"Multiple fractures, missing teeth, collapsed lung, possible internal bleeding, severe lacerations, hemorrhaging. Christ, someone definitely took your boys to the ball game," Thomas said.p

>p class="indented double"Gordon took another sip from his cup of Joe, chapping his lips as he did. "Then to the after party. According to my report, these punks decided to jump a pony and his family outside Miller's Diner. Pretty much the whole H.L.S. 'jump em' and kick the shit outta em' routine."p

>p class="indented double"That'll be them right there. The stallion's just gotten out of the infirmary, so Officer Langley is getting their statement." Gordon gestured to a family of ponies at the end of the hallway in the presence of another office in blue. "Poor guy. Whole thing happened in front of his kid too."p

>p class="indented double"Kid doesn't seem too torn up about it, though." Thomas eyed the young colt who was smiling brightly as he flipped through an old comic book. "So, you assume it's the Punisher's handiwork?"p

>p class="indented double"No, not his M.O. 'Sides, if it really were him, these boys would be deader than a sack of nails but, here's where it gets real interesting." Gordon pulled out a leather notebook from his coat pocket, shifting through the pages. "Apparently, and I say quote, a hero came out of nowhere and saved my mommy and daddy."p

>p class="indented double"Gordon's words left Thomas completely baffled. "You took a statementâ€| from a five year old?"p

>p class="indented double"Hey, kid was the only one calm enough at the time, sue me but that's not the point. He said a hero, as in one guy. Can you believe it? emOne guyem." Gordon highlighted before forcing a chuckle./p

>p class="indented double"emOne guy, huh?em/p

>p class="indented double"Now intrigued, the Thomas padded up beside the metal beds, pulling up on their blood soaked Tâ€"Shirts as his studied every bruise, every contusion, every gash and laceration with the utmost detail.p

>p class="indented double"Interestingâ€|" he muttered under his breath. He narrowed his gaze at an apparent stab wound.p

>p class="indented double"If you asked me, it was probably just another gang fight gone wrong. 'Sides, did they actually expect me to believe that one guy is capable of all of this?" Gordon took another sip of his coffee.p

>p class="indented double"Sorry to break it to you Detective, but the kid's telling the truth," Thomas said, almost causing the Detective to choke on his coffee.p

>p class="indented double"Gordon coughed, wiping the stains from his lips. "You're kidding me."p

>p class="indented double" "Wish I was. Come here and take a look at this." Thomas gestured for Gordon to come closer before tracing the bruised areas on the young man's chest.p

>p class="indented double" "Look at the size of this contusion. Now, compare it to the others. You'll find that they're exactly the same, meaning they were all done by the same set of fists," Thomas stated. "But that's not all. Solar plexus, chest, jaw, stomach, kidney, liver, groinâ€¦ all aimed at body's vital points."p

>p class="indented double" "Something you wish to imply, Doc?" Gordon inquired.p

>p class="indented double" "It means, whoever your perp is, he's no random goodâ€¦willed samaritan. Whoever did this, knew what he was doing, and he knows how to throw a punch." Thomas folded his arms and rubbed his chin in thought.p

>p class="indented double" "So, what you're telling me is that we might be dealing with a pro."p

>p class="indented double" "Not necessarily, noâ€¦ a true pro would have incapacitated them instead, not beat them half to death."p

>p class="indented double" Thomas continued, pondering for a few moments before pointing out the more ghastly wounds. "Come to think of it, I've seen wounds like these before, more precisely from victims of abuse. Emotionally driven, but their injuries are often irregular â€¦ wild but random, and rarely fatal. You see, regressing alcoholics maybe intoxicated animals but even animals toe the line."p

>p class="indented double" "But this, this here was done with rageâ€¦ empure rageem. Wild, precise and intentional, without pity and without remorse, which only tells me only one thing, Detective," Thomas said, his voice now taking a rather somber tone./p

>p class="indented double" "That he wanted to hurt them on purpose?"p

>p class="indented double" "He wanted to emkillem them," Thomas corrected, his eyes narrowing. "But what he did, he did solely out of retribution. So, not only is he a temperamental psychopath, he also has a soft spot for themâ€¦ the ponies I mean. That being said, the real question remains, why didn't he finish them off?"/p

>p class="indented double" "You pulling my leg here, Doc? Hell, I don't give a crap if volunteers at soup kitchens or donates to the Salvation Army. Bottom line is, the guy's dangerous and if I'm going to be looking for one guyâ€¦"p

>p class="indented double" Thomas raised his hand.p

>p class="indented double" "Holdâ€¦ that thought," he said, moving over the greaser laying on the far right in order to take a better look at the bruising on the side of his face. "Actually, you might be looking for two. See this? It's different from the rest, meaning there was someone else at the scene."p

>p class="indented double" "What makes you so sure it was someone else? Could have been one of his pals. He chickened out, tried to run, embam!em Ain't nothing I haven't seen before," said Gordon/p

>p class="indented double" "Well, unless the guy who assaulted him was master of Dianxue, I would highly doubt that," Thomas said, moving the greaser's head for a closer look.p

>p class="indented double" "Dianâ€¦ what?" Gordon asked.p

>p class="indented double" "Dianxue, you see, the Chinese believe that the body is made of series of acupressure points. I've read that with years of training, one can even paralyze, immobilize, or even kill by striking those points. Your boy here took one straight to the Vagus nerveâ€¦ he was out even before he hit the floor. Any harder and he would've been dead."p

>p class="indented double"Mother of God. So what exactly are we dealing with? An accomplice?" Gordon took a sip from this paper cup. From the jitteriness in his fingers, Thomas could tell he was nervous.p

>p class="indented double"Maybe, that or he could be the only reason your boys here are breathing," Thomas added. "Then again, I could be wrong. Might want to run it through just in case."p

>p class="indented double"There was a long silence between the two men, until Gordon muffled a chuckle but then began laughing. "Woo, I'll admit, you had me going there for a sec' but I sure am impressed, Doc. You just did in ten minutes what would have taken them police academy grads weeks. Doctor, surgeon emandem criminal profiler. Seriously, is there no end to your talents?"/p

>p class="indented double"Thomas rubbed the back of his neck as he smiled. He was never one for compliments, no matter how genuine they might seem. "Well, I'm a horrible cook, if that counts."p

>p class="indented double"So is my wife, but you don't see me complaining now, do you?"p

>p class="indented double"emWell, technically you are now.em/p

>p class="indented double"Gordon sighed as he calmed from his laughing fit. "By the way, Doc, if you ever get tired of this place, you know my offer still stands. We could use someone like you down at the precinct." Gordon took another swig at his coffee cup.p

>p class="indented double"emAnd here we go again.em/p

>p class="indented double"He sure was a persistent one. Thomas rolled his eyes, trying hard to keep the internal grimace from showing. "I'm flattered, really, but I told you before, I'm a doctorâ€| not a detective. Besides, I've gotâ€|p

>p class="indented double"The doctor jumped when the greaser nearest to him made a grab for his wrist, grasping it with a grip like vice. "Howard Stark! Howard Stark! Howard Stark! He did this! He did this!" the greaser screamed at the top of his lungs.p

>p class="indented double"Shit, nurse!" Gordon cried, spilling what was left of his cup of Joe all over the floor as he wrenched the injured greaser away. "Goddammit! Nurse!"p

>p class="indented double"Thomas felt numb, the shock coursing through his veins as potent as the adrenaline that fuelled it as he watched Gordon restrain the greaser for the nurses to what was necessary. The screaming continued, drawing alarmed looks from all over the lobby. A full ten minutes went by before the screaming finally subsided. There was no denying it, the greaser was scared out of his wits, traumatized. Whatever happened in that alley, Thomas was certain that it would haunt him for the rest of his life.p

>p class="indented double"emPerhaps that was his intentionâ€| perhaps that was his design.em/p

>p class="indented double"The emHellem was that?" Thomas asked, finally mustering the courage to speak./p

>p class="indented double"Beats me. Some reason, they kept yelling the name Howard Stark as if he were Jesus freakin' Christ all the way to the Goddamned hospital. Though last I checked, the guy's in Africa visiting some backwater, hillbilly state called Wakanda or something like that. Heh, I guess our perp must've bashed their heads in a little harder than we thought." Gordon smirked.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas narrowed his eyes, unwilling to pass off the incident as mere hysteria. Though, he chose not to pursue the matter or risk escalating it entirely.p

>p class="indented double"The Detective removed his glasses. "Christ, I'm getting too old for this shit." He breathed over the grimed surface of his glasses and swabbed it with his handkerchief.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas cleared his throat, realizing it was

time he beat a hasty retreat. "Well, anyways, I believe my work here is done. Now, if you'd excuse me, I am needed elsewhere."p
>p class="indented double"The detective slipped his glasses back on. "Sure thing. You know Doc, I never got the chance to thankâ€| " There was an awkward pause the moment he realized the doctor had vanished without a trace. "â€| you. How in God's name does he do that?"p
>hr

>p class="indented double"There were days when navigating through these hallways were as effortless as breathing but there were also days when being a sleep deprived mess would inevitably turn the hospital into a maze. Thomas groaned, stepping out of the lift for the third time to the chimes of a bell and the wellâ€oiled mechanisms of an automatic door. This ward in particular was far livelier than the rest, with bright pastel colors on the once whiteâ€plastered walls in addition to loose verses from memorable nursery rhymes completing the dÃ©cor. Despite being a Ponyâ€only ward segregated from the rest, the hallways abounded with the sounds of laughter and chortles of foals, even the cries of a new born to the joys of first time parents.p
>p class="indented double"In all honesty, pediatrics was an interesting subject back in medical school but, it was definitely not Thomas' forte. Not to mention children and foals possessed no concept of boundaries, and their uncontrollable urge to touch everything annoyed him to no end. Though, Thomas found himself in an interesting predicament close to a year ago with the arrival of a young five year old patient diagnosed with a chronic and incredibly rare ailment.p

>p class="indented double"Although, when no doctor within a hundred mile radius of D.C. would willingly take her case, Thomas volunteered. Since then, the two had become inseparable. Thomas jumped out of the way as two unicorn foals raced down the hallway engaged in a friendly game of tag, being pursued by a mare in a nurse's uniform, a surprising sight that brought a smile to his face.p

>p class="indented double"emChildren, if only people can learn to see the world through their eyes. God, sometimes I wish we'd never grow up.em/p

>p class="indented double"He soon arrived at room Three Eighty before rapping his finger on the white wooden surface of the plywood door. "Come in," came the small, childâ€like reply, as Thomas entered the room with a twist on the brass doorknob. The room was averagely sized for a one person ward complete with standard furniture. The sweet scent of freshly picked flowers drew his attention to the clear glass vase laying idly atop a coffee table at the corner of the room. It would have been completely silent had it not been the low volume of a tube radio set in unison to the soft beeps and humming of an electrocardiograph machine and a breathing apparatus.p

>p class="indented double"Lying on her bed In the middle of the room, illuminated in the radiant light of the morning sun a partly draped window, was a little charcoal grey bat pony. A pair of golden eyes shifted to meet him with a cheerful smile. "Morning, Doctor Wayne."p

>p class="indented double""And a good morning to you too, Robyn." Thomas returned her greeting with the warmest of smiles, shutting the door behind him as he approached her bedside. "But you know, you shouldn't be up so late in the day."p

>p class="indented double""It's okayâ€|" she said out of the corner of her mouth while she gripped the end of a pencil between her teeth. "I couldn't sleep because it started to hurt this morning, but Nurse Martha gave me my medicine."p

>p class="indented double" "Is that so?" Thomas inquired, pulling up a chair as he took a seat. "You know, Martha cares a lot about you."p

>p class="indented double" The furred end of her ears perked at the doctor's words. "How about you, Doctor Wayne, do you care about me?" A charming smile curled on her lips.p

>p class="indented double" Thomas grinned. "Nope, of course not, I'm only here to play doctor." He presented his white coat.p

>p class="indented double" Robyn pouted and smacked his hand playfully with her little hoof. em"Doctor Wayneâ€| "em/p

>p class="indented double" Thomas chuckled, ruffling his fingers though her silky violent mane. "Of course I do. Never has a day gone by where I don't think about you."p

>p class="indented double" Robyn beamed reaching for his hand as she hugged her little hooves around it, nuzzling her cheek into his gentle touch. "You promise?" she asked, resting her eyes upon the young doctor with the most adorable puppy dog gaze.p

>p class="indented double" Thomas caressed her cheek and nodded. "I promise."p

>p class="indented double" With a contented nod, the little bat pony picked up her stubby little pencil and went back to work, diligently sketching on her art pad.p

>p class="indented double" "What're you working on?" Thomas inquired.p

>p class="indented double" "Your birthday present," Robyn replied, grinning as she lifted the unfinished drawing for him to see.p

>p class="indented double" emOh Goddammit, Martha!em/p

>p class="indented double" The doctor's cheeks flushed, chuckling nervously as he rubbed the back of his head. "Heh, Martha told you, huh?"p

>p class="indented double" "Actually, your butler Walter did."p

>p class="indented double" emGoddammit, Walter!em/p

>p class="indented double" Mentally putting a pin on having a word with his trusty steward later, he was soon awestricken by the beautiful graphite sketch of a bat pony draped in an exotic medieval suit of armor. Though, what fascinated him most was the fantasy batâ€like motif adorning the helmet, gauntlets, hoof plates and chest pieces complete with a long black cape drifting majestically in the nonâ€existent wind.p

>p class="indented double" "You like it?" Robyn grinned.p

>p class="indented double" "It's beautiful. You're incredibly talented, you know that?"p

>p class="indented double" "That's what my daddy said, too. It's not finished, but I promise it'll be done in time for your birthday!" she chirped, flapping her small leathery as she did.p

>p class="indented double" Thomas cracked a smile. "Take your time, Robyn, there's no rush. By the way, who is that?"p

>p class="indented double" "Oh! This is a picture from an old bat pony story my Gran Gran used to tell me," Robyn said. "Actually, everypony from the Hollow Shades knows this story."p

>p class="indented double" "Well since Gran Gran isn't here, how about you be the one to tell it to me, then?" He clasped his hands together as he gave her a playful wink.p

>p class="indented double" Robyn beamed as she began her story. "Well, a long, long time ago, there was an evil king who ruled the Hollow Shades with an iron hoof. He was a big, big meanie and he would destroy any pony who would dare stand in his way. The bat ponies hated him, but they were also too afraid to stand up to him."p

>p class="indented double" "I can imagine," Thomas said with a chuckle.p

>p class="indented double"Then one day, a brave bat pony decided he can no longer stand aside and watch as his fellow ponies suffered. So he made himself a suit of armor, then rose up to fight the evil king. The evil king sent his evil soldiers to capture him but he was too strong and too clever for them. Finally, after a long battle, he defeated the evil king and freed all the bat ponyâ€ and everypony lived happy ever after."p

>p class="indented double"Thomas grinned, clapping his hands as he did. "So tell me, did this hero have a name?"p

>p class="indented double" "Hhm!" Robyn nodded as she held up the picture again. "Well nopony ever found out who he really was, but the bat ponies called him the Dark Knight."p

>p class="indented double" "Ooh, that sounds fearsome." Thomas smiled. "It's a wonderful story, Robyn. Makes me wish we had a Dark Knight of our own. Heaven knows, we could really use a hero right about now."p

>p class="indented double" "Well, nothing is impossible if you wish hard enough, at least that's what Gran Gran used to tell me," Robyn said with a grin but no sooner did her smile began to fade, leaving only but a sad, doleful glint in her eyes. "Doctor Wayneâ€ I'm never getting better, am I?"p

>p class="indented double"Thomas felt the bitter chill of a cold sweat trickle down the back of his neck as he laughed. "Whereâ€ where did that come from? Robyn, you know that's not true. We have the best doctors here and the best medicineâ€"p

>p class="indented double" "It's okay, Doctor Wayne, you don't have to lie to me," she said. "You're not the first doctor who said that. Every pony says that before they move me to another hospital, then another and another. They all say the same thing."p

>p class="indented double"emShe knowsâ€em/p

>p class="indented double"Thomas's lips trembled. "Robynâ€ Iâ€"p

>p class="indented double"Robyn shifted her gaze to the young doctor as tears welled in her eyes. "You don't have to lie anymore. It's okay because I'm no longer afraid. I'm readyâ€ I'm ready to die." she mustered a weak but gentle smile.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas gritted his teeth as he was forced to turn away, stifling his grief as he smothered the few staggered sobs with his hand.p

>p class="indented double"emHow could she? How could she say something like that?em/p

>p class="indented double" "Doctor Wayne, are you crying?" Robyn asked, placing her little hoof on Thomas' hand. He immediately wiped the tears from his eyes.p

>p class="indented double" "Em, no, no. I'm fine."p

>p class="indented double"emYou lieâ€em/p

>p class="indented double" A gasp escaped the little bat pony as she found herself in Thomas' tender embrace. "Doctor Wayne?"p

>p class="indented double" "Robyn, you're a brave girl, the bravest I know. That is why I want you to hold on for as long as you can." Thomas rested his cheek along her head.p

>p class="indented double"Robyn blinked innocently at the young doctor. "Butâ€"p

>p class="indented double" "I'm going to do everything in my power to make you better, okay? No matter what it takes, no matter what I have to do, I'm going to save you. You hear me, I'm going to save you."p

>p class="indented double"emYou always lieâ€em/p

>p class="indented double"Robyn closed her eyes, wrapping her little hooves around the young doctor's neck as she rested her little head

upon his shoulder. "You promise, Doctor Wayne?"

>p class="indented double"Thomas kissed her gently on her forehead. "I promise."

>p class="indented double"emWhy?em/p

>p class="indented double"Thomas smiled, making her giggle as he petted her mane when he heard the faint but unmistakable words 'Breaking News' from the nearby radio. "Robyn, why don't you go ahead finish your drawing. I have just the spot it in my office when you're done." He booped her in the nose.

>p class="indented double""Alright, Dr. Wayne!" she beamed, picking up the pencil and going straight back to work. The doctor's made his way to the radio before turning up the volume.

>p class="indented double"em"Tragedy has struck downtown Washington D.C. as the masked gunman known only as the Punisher, opened fire on the local chapter members of antiâ€pony activist groups, Humanity's Last Stand and the Church of Humanity, leaving dozens dead and dozens more injured. Unfortunately, the suspect had fled the scene before local law enforcements could arrive. Oddly, no ponies were hurt in this ordeal."em/p

>p class="indented double"em"Detective John Flass, who was first on scene, had this to say â€ "There ain't no excuse for what happened here today. We'll get this son of a bitch, we'll get him, you'll see." em/p

>p class="indented double"em"According to eye witness reports, the group of antiâ€pony activists had turned up unannounced at a peaceful demonstration held by a group of ponies in protest to the controversial Pony Registration Act, demanding they disperse, but tensions soon flared when the group allegedly threatened violence should they refuse."em/p

>p class="indented double"em"Here is what one of the eyewitnesses, Tommy Merlyn, son of Queen Consolidates' Vice President, Malcolm Merlyn who was incidentally caught in the crossfire, had to say â€ "I don't know what happened. I mean, I was on my way home from the airport, justâ€| just drivingâ€| then this guy just came out of nowhere. I mean sure, they were cursing, they were yellingâ€| but when that guy swung his baseball bat, everythingâ€| everything went to Hell."em/p

>p class="indented double"em"We were, however, unable to reach Detective Bill Gordon, head of the Punisher task force, for any further comments. This shocking incident has come as the worst of the Punisher's crime spree ever since his appearance here in D.C. almost four months ago, prior to his horrifying rampages across Brooklyn, Detroit, Metropolis and even Gotham City bringing his overall body count to at least a hundred. Despite casualties being primarily antiâ€pony activists, even now, detectives are unclear on his true motives. Local P.D. have been increasing their efforts in trying to apprehend this armed assailant before he kills again. Police have reminded the public that the Punisher is to be considered armed and dangerous and should be avoided at all cost."em/p

>p class="indented double"Thomas clasped his hands together as he twirled his thumbs in thought. The Punisher was no sociopathic, trigger happy, mass murderer. Besides, if getting off to pure unadulterated violence as a mean to satisfy his twisted desires, the ponies would have also been part of the statistics. Strangely, that was not the case, instead his conquest focused primarily on the H.L.S. and C.O.H.

>p class="indented double"emRetribution, no retaliation maybe? Just like our little friend down in the alleyway.em/p

>p class="indented double"em"In other news, it seems D.C. isn't the only city terrorized by a mysterious masked outlaw. Straight from

Starling City, local P.D. have uncovered the brutal massacre and murder of one of Starling City's most notorious crime lords, Frank Bertinelli and the Bertinelli family. Not to mention barely days before, the shocking assassinations of Guillermo Barrera, Jason Brodeur, Ted Daniels, Adam Hunt, and Scott Morgan, who were prominent figures of Starling City's wealthiest, shook the city to its core, spreading fear amongst Starling's elites."

>p class="indented double"em"Through numerous eye witness reports, police have identified the 'vigilante' known only as 'The Hood'. Like the Punisher, Starling P.D. have initiated a special task force to be led by Detective Ronald Lance to track down and capture the Hood. Here is what he had to say â€" "I don't care what anyone says, the guy's no hero. He's nothing more than a Goddamned murderer, and I won't stop until I bring that son of a bitch down. No one takes the law into their own hands, not in my town."

>p class="indented double"em"Surprisingly, not all of Starling's elites were shocked by news. Such was Moira Dearden, heir to Dearden Empire who had this to say â€" "My sympathies to their grieving families, but these men have long evaded the law despite numerous allegations and evidence of having direct ties to the Starling City underworld with crimes ranging from racketeering, fraud and even murder. Well, perhaps someone's finally took a standâ€| perhaps someone's finally said enough."

>p class="indented double"em"That is all we have for the news, stay tuned and we will keep you posted. Until then, good morning America, and God bless."

>p class="indented double"Thomas felt his chest heave with a heavy sigh before resting his chin on the ridge of his knuckles, allowing his eyes a moment's rest while he pondered on his compulsive need to keep up with the media. In truth, the American people were nothing more than masochists and bad news was just another substitute for a razor. He shrugged, feeling ashamed for being a part of it all.

>p class="indented double"Wayne!"

>p class="indented double"He cringed at the crude tone of address as he shifted his attention to the man at the door. Thomas narrowed his gaze at no other than Doctor Armistan Crane, Dean of Knightfall. A pitiful excuse of human being, known only by his list of depravities and misdemeanors. From racism to negligence, malpractices and blatant abuse of power, the list went on.

>p class="indented double"Get your insubordinate ass out here, emnow!em" he barked, furrowing his brow as his nostrils flared./p

>p class="indented double"Doctor Wayne?" Irises of dark brown fell on the cowering little bat pony as she peeked from behind her sketch pad. "Is everything alright?"

>p class="indented double"Thomas smiled. "It's fine. Just keep on drawing while I have a quick word with Doctor Crane. Tell you what, I'll grab you some chocolate milk when I get back, okay?"

>p class="indented double"Robyn's face lit up as bright as the morning sky. "Yay! I'll see you later then Doctor Wayne."

>p class="indented double"He made his way out of the room, carefully shutting the door behind him before turning to address the elderly doctor. em"What?"em he said./p

>p class="indented double"Doctor Crane ran his fingers over the glistening skin of his bald spot where the rest of his craggy blonde hair should have been. "Would you be kind enough to explain to me just what the Hell you think you're doing?"

>p class="indented double"Smug vague questions, how it peeved the young doctor to no end. Thomas raised an eyebrow. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

>p class="indented double"He flinched as a piece of paper was shoved in his face. "emThisem, this is your signature isn't it? You authorized the release of this medication, didn't you?" Doctor Crane rapped on the bottom right corner of the page./p

>p class="indented double""Yes, yes I didâ€| Your point?" Thomas took an indifferent tone as he moved the Dean's hand from his line of sight.p

>p class="indented double""You're a bloody fool, Wayne! I gave you a direct order, and you deliberately disobeyed me!" Doctor Crane yelled. His voice thundered across the entire wing, drawing a heap of nervous gazes.p

>p class="indented double""Well emexcuse meem, Doctor, I was under the impression that this was a hospital. If you've taken the time to actually read my reports instead of planning your next fishing trip, you'd be well aware of my patient's condition and why she needs her prescription," Thomas spat./p

>p class="indented double"Doctor Crane lifted a finger. "I know you aren't fond of me, Wayne, but believe me when I say the feeling is mutual. Let us not forget that I am the Dean of this hospital and within the confines of these four walls, my word is law!"p

>p class="indented double""We are doctors, our duty is to the public, human or pony, no matter what."p

>p class="indented double""We are supposed to help emourem people!" Doctor Crane yelled. "Our kind! The human race, and I would be a nigger's uncle before I let emyou/em squander emmy/em hospital's resources on a bunch of emstinking/em ponies!"/p

>p class="indented double"Thomas's face went slack, as well as every pony within earshot of their conversation. The doctor drew a deep breath. "Doctor Crane, may I speak with you privately, please?" He curled his fists as he stormed off.p

>p class="indented double""Wayne? WAYNE! I'm not finished with you!" Doctor Crane cried after him, but Thomas had already made a beeline for the vacant room at the end of the hallway. The Dean trailed behind him, his footsteps growing louder with every passing minute.p

>p class="indented double""Hey Wayne! Don't you ever turn your back on me, you understand?" Dr. Crane as both of them entered.p

>p class="indented double"Doctor Crane flinched as Thomas slammed the door behind him.p

>p class="indented double""Jesus Christ, what the fuâ€"p

>p class="indented double""Now you listen, and you listen well, I know you're the one in charge of this fascist excuse for a hospital. Now that's out of the way, I also want you to know that I don't give a flying emfuckem," Thomas growled. His voice had become guttural, almost primal./p

>p class="indented double"Dr. Crane barred his teeth. "Now you see here, youâ€"p

>p class="indented double""I'm not fucking finished! This is a hospital, and I will treat the sick and the needy, human or pony, without prejudice and without discrimination!"p

>p class="indented double""You will do whatever I fucking tell you, Wayne!"p

>p class="indented double""I will follow whatever orders you are authorized to give as Dean, but if you stand in the way of me getting emmyem patient the care she needs, I will personally have you emlynched!/em Do I make myself absolutely, one hundred percent, crystal clear?" Thomas snarled, his voice baneful and grim./p

>p class="indented double"Doctor Crane drew a blank stare, making his best impression of a fish out of water. "Didâ€| did you just threaten me, Wayne?"p

>p class="indented double"Thomas smirked. "Doctor Crane, you should know by now that I don't make threats. Threats are hollow, meaningless. No, I make empromisesem."/p

>p class="indented double""Now see here, you cocky little snot, if you weren't Nolan's little boy, I would have had your license revoked and your ass out on the streets decades ago!" Doctor Crane spat.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas stepped forward, coming face to face with the old Dean. "Then, what are you waiting for? Do it, DO IT! Call security, take my license away and throw me out into the street for all to see! I dare you!" he seethed.p

>p class="indented double"There was a long, unnerving silence before Thomas finally spoke. "Can't do it, can you? Enlighten me then, what's worse? Risking my father revoking your funding, or having your little hospital on the front page of every newspaper in the state? You may have the entire hospital running scared, but guess what, you spineless hypocrite, I am emnotem afraid of you."/p

>p class="indented double"Doctor Crane swallowed hard just as Thomas continued. "Well then, since I'm here to stay, I'm only going to say this once. As long as I remain a doctor of Knightfall General, my patient will have emfull, unrestrictedem access to this facility and to any prescriptions authorized by yours truly. You'd be best to remember that wellâ€| we're done here." Thomas turned to leave./p

>p class="indented double"Though, just as he reached for the brass doorknob. "Tread lightly, Thomas, even as a Wayne you're not completely untouchable. In this day and age, being a white knight is more a fool's endeavor than a noble cause," said Doctor Crane.p

>p class="indented double""I am whatever the people need me to be." Thomas stepped out.p

>hr

>p class="indented double"His fists clenched, his nostrils flared, and the rage in his eyes could have frightened the Holy Spirit out of even the most religious of men. His furious footsteps shattered the eerie silence of the empty wing, echoing through every corner of the hollow hallways without restraint, well aware that the upper floors had been vacant for a while now. Besides, he knew it would be unsightly for the children to see him like this. His mind was in disarray and the more he dwelled on his heated exchange with that pathetic pile of racist garbage, the angrier he got. He needed some air, something to calm his nerves, anything to quell his murderous urge.p

>p class="indented double""Goddamnit!" Thomas yelled, his voice boomed followed by a thunderous thud as he slugged his fist into the plastered wall, blasting it clean through.p

>p class="indented double"His breaths were heavy, slow, but paced as he glared at the end result. There was no word in existence that would justify the amount of animosity Thomas bore for that human filth, even the word hate would not do him justice. It made Thomas sick to his stomach just knowing that he would treat the ponies on his staff like garbage, worse is the way he would treat his pony patients. There were even times where he had contemplated leaving them to die by refusing them any medical attention, and none of the staff would dare disobey him or risk invoking his wrath, all except for Thomas. Though, if there was one thing he despised more than Crane, would be to invoke his surname as an instrument of immunity.p

>p class="indented double"Not a day goes by where he had not contemplated strangling the living daylights out of Doctor Crane, relishing in the thought as sweet as fresh apple cider that the world

would be a better place without men like him.p

>p class="indented double"emIn fact, it would be too damned easy!em/p

>p class="indented double""Hey, what'ca do that for? What'd the wall ever do to you?"p

>p class="indented double"The suave voice instantly made the young doctor cringe as he quickly ripped his hand out of the wall to a hail of silent curses. The last thing he needed was to receive a written citation and a dark blotch on his career for destroying hospital property. "Hey, look I'm sorry. I'll repair it myself if that's what it takes, just don't call it in."p

>p class="indented double"A sigh of relief escaped him the moment he was met with the familiar face of a young Negro man no older than he was, with his shoulder against the plastered wall. He rested his half lidded eyes, squinted with interest on the young doctor as he cleaned the grime from his fingers with a scraggly rag. Thomas assumed he had just finished oiling the gears in the elevator shaft, because none of the other handymen would dare go near it.p

>p class="indented double"emLeast, not after what happened last time.em/p

>p class="indented double""Man, I would love to take you up on that, but I'm afraid you'll only make it worse."p

>p class="indented double"Thomas chuckled as he rubbed the back of his head. "Hey, Joseph, sorry you had to see that."p

>p class="indented double""It's cool, cat, not that I have anything better to do today anyways." Joseph wiped the rest of it over his dirty denim overalls before pulling his chestnut leather beret over his thin fro. "So, lemme guess, ole Scarecrow's got your ass all twisted again?"p

>p class="indented double""Ugh, you don't know the half of it." Thomas leaned his back against the wall as he crossed his arms. "He was all over my back for authorizing my patient's medication."p

>p class="indented double""You mean Robyn, that cute little bat pony? Now why the Hell would he be pullin' shit like that? What in God's name could he be thinkin'? Ain't that what a doctor's supposed to do? Cure people, in your case ponies?" Joseph leaned in to examine the damage.p

>p class="indented double""I don't know Joe, this whole thing is getting out of hand. Soon he'll have ponies dying in his wards and because of this new law, no one would even care."p

>p class="indented double"Joseph shook his head. "Well, I sure can relate. Hell, I can't remember a time the people of America last gave a damned bout us colored folk. Huh, land of the free, my ass."p

>p class="indented double""Well, least they didn't consider shipping you guys into internment camps," Thomas said.p

>p class="indented double""They would if they could. Mark my words, if they had caught a brother instead of a unicorn, things would have turned out a whole lot differently. Hell, they did it to the Japs back in the war, what's to stop them from doin' it to us, hhm?" Joseph picked at the loose plaster surrounding the hole.p

>p class="indented double""Point taken," Thomas's blank gaze settled on the pale marble floor.p

>p class="indented double""If you ask me, Tom, the government needs to pull its head outta its bitch ass and focus on more important things. Like that crazy ass trigger happy cracka' lightin' up downtown like it's the Fourth of July," Joseph said.p

>p class="indented double""Hhm, it's strange, though."p

>p class="indented double"Joseph cocked an eyebrow from over the edge of his dusty shoulder. "What is?"p

>p class="indented double""Doesn't it bother you that he only seems

to be gunning for the C.O.H. and H.L.S.? I mean, I know they are a bunch of crazy, religious racists but Hell, even I wouldn't wish being pumped full of lead on my worst enemy."

>p class="indented double"emActually, that's not entirely true.em/p

>p class="indented double""Hell if I know Tom. Ain't my business to know what kind of crazy's goin on with a guy like that. I'll tell you one thing though, if it's beef, whatever the Hell they did, they must've pissed him the emfuckem off."/p

>p class="indented double"Thomas smirked. "Don't be surprised if I'd end up sharing a cell with him in Arkham. With Crane around, I fear for the ponies here."/p

>p class="indented double""Now that's crazy talk." Joseph scoffed.p

>p class="indented double""I'm seriousâ€|" Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose. "Joe, you may think I've got balls of steel standing up to Crane, but truth is I'm scared, alrightâ€| I'm terrified. I'm afraid that one day I'm going to walk in here and Robynâ€"p

>p class="indented double""Now you cut that shit out Thomas Wayne, you hear?" Joseph snapped. "Listen, ain't no one in this Goddamned place loves that little girl more than you, and I know you ain't gonna let shit happen to her."/p

>p class="indented double"Thomas shrugged. "I'm not always gonna be around, Joe. I'm no superhero, I can't run faster than a speeding bullet or leap buildings in a single bound. I'mâ€| I'm just a man."/p

>p class="indented double""Not to her, not to Robyn and sure as Hell not to me. You've given so much of yourself to that little girl, and may Jesus strike me down before I let you to talk shit about yourself," Joseph said. "Like my grandma used to say, God bless her soul, you gotta have a little faith, and I have faith in you."/p

>p class="indented double"The young doctor chuckled. "Thanks, you're a good friend Joe. Seems that everyone's picking me off the ground today, save for myself."/p

>p class="indented double"Joseph laughed. "Hell, friends with Thomas Wayne, emtheem Thomas Wayne. If my old man were alive today, he'd give me a medal. Gotta admit, I had my doubts when a Wayne checked into this place, thought he'd be all prissy and snobby and shit."/p

>p class="indented double""Would you guys just cut the whole Wayne thing out already? Seriously, it's not like I'm king of the world or something," Thomas snapped.p

>p class="indented double""True that," Joseph picked out the last of the loose plaster. "Well, you're in luck. All it needs is some plaster and a fresh coat of paint and it'll be as good as new."/p

>p class="indented double""Thanks Joe, I owe you one." Thomas gave the young man a pat on the shoulder.p

>p class="indented double""Uhâ€"ah, you owe me two. Remember the time you crashed your Rolls into the front porch?" Joseph crossed his arms.p

>p class="indented double"Thomas gritted his teeth and cringed. "Yeaah, sorry about that. You know I had no choice, the woman was in labor."/p

>p class="indented double"Joseph chuckled "That's what'ca get for bein' such a white knight. Tell you what, why don't you make it up to me by buyin' me a drink? I know this new bar downtown and I think Mister Wayne, could actually use some time away from this place."/p

>p class="indented double""Bar? You mean after work?" Thomas inquired, a little hesitant.p

>p class="indented double"Joseph gave him an unamused look. "No, right now. Let me go ask my supervisor if he'd let me out at ten in the morning to go grab a pint. Of course after work!"p

>p class="indented double""I don't know Joe, I mean I have a ton of stuff just lying on my desk, and Robynâ€"p

>p class="indented double""Hey, one night out never killed anyone. 'Sides, you need loosen up before you emstabem somebody, or worse, havin' me doin' double shifts patchin' up more holes in them walls. Come on, hook a brother up."/p

>p class="indented double"A pregnant pause hung in the air as Thomas gave some thought. Finally, unable to bear the sight of Joseph's pearly whites behind his silly grin, he shrugged in defeat. "Alright, alright, fine. One drink, just oneâ€| then we come right back."p

>p class="indented double""Man, for a white boy, you're no fun at all." Joseph teased.p

>p class="indented double""Well this emwhite boyem, has a job to do, more importantly he has a patient to save," Thomas said./p

>p class="indented double""Hey, Fox! The damned toilet in the elderly ward's all clogged up again, there's shit everywhere!" came a voice at the end of the hallway from a fellow handyman as Joseph groaned.p

>p class="indented double""And right now, it seems you do, too. Good luck, Joe." Thomas drew a cheeky grin.p

>p class="indented double""Aha, aha ha, kiss my black ass motherfucker," Joseph snapped as he turned to leave. "I get off at five so don't be late, a'right?"p

>p class="indented double"Thomas shook his head. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."p

>centerstrong[To Be Continued...]strong/center

3. Season 1, Episode 3 - The Brother

centerem"Brotherhood means laying down your life for somebody, really willing to sacrifice yourself for somebody else." â€" Tim Hetherington/em/centercenter/centercenterstrongEpisode 3:/strong The Brother/centercenter/center

>p class="indented double"em"I said I was out of the game."em/p

>p class="indented double"He gasped, feeling the splashing water's bitter chill like vipers sinking their fangs into his nerves. Hunching over, he narrowed his coal-colored eyes at his own reflection on the shattered looking glass. His chest heaved with a heavy sigh. His gaze soon trailed to the small, crumpled piece of paper wedged between the mirror frames.p

>p class="indented double"Penned crudely in red ink were the words, emThe Roman, 8 A.M.em/p

>p class="indented double"em"Hey, yer the best, don't matter what anypony says. I'm tellin' ya now, he's willin' to part with a shit ton of dough to get this done."em/p

>p class="indented double"He ran a hand down his clean-shaven face, flicking the last bits of water from the tips of his fingers into the stained porcelain sink before stepping outside. The lamp bathed the room with a flickering amber glow and the stale, musky scent of cigarette smoke mixed with mold in the air. He groaned, ruffling the strands of his dark brown hair as he sat himself on the moth-eaten mattress. The springs creaked in protest.p

>p class="indented double"em"How much we talking about?"em/p

>p class="indented double"em"One grand, cash, straight up."em/p

>p class="indented double"Grabbing one of the loose cigarettes that littered the nearby night stand, he fished out a silver lighter from

the pocket of his navy green cargo pants and lit it. He took a long drag, eyeballing the shifting slits of a hideous cat-themed clock upon the wall as they shifted back and forth like a metronomes.

>p class="indented double"The stallion was taking his sweet time.p

>p class="indented double"Keeping the lit cigarette in his mouth, he glanced over to the black leather mask and a pair of aviator goggles lying next to him " the tools of his trade. If there was one thing he'd learned after all those years, is that a man's identity is his most valuable possession. Especially when it involves dealing with the underbelly of society, both human and pony.p

>p class="indented double"Transportation is a simple and precise business. There is point A and Point B. The key is getting there without getting shot in the face. From the mob, crooked cops and shrewd politicians, everyone had dirty little secrets packed away in neat little cardboard boxes. Since the golden age, they ran contraband the only way they knew how: armed escorts and hired muscle. Though, after The Secret War of Twenty-six, they needed something new. p

>p class="indented double"Enter the Couriers or as he preferred, Runners. Agile, athletic young men who were sharp, quick on their feet, and knew silence was worth its weight in gold, literally. Today was no different, a simple pickup and a drop off, no questions asked. In fact, the less you knew, the better. The upside: Benjamins enough to take you to the moon and back. The downside? The mortality rate. Yes, the risks were high, but no one said the life of a runner would be an easy one. 'Sides, he would make more money in a single run than a whole year running the counter at the neighborhood grocery. As far as he was concerned, it was just another day's work.p

>p class="indented double"He cleared the last bit of smoke from his lungs, curling his lips at the half-smoked butt clenched between his fingers. He made a promise to himself that he would quit, but then again, so was never coming back. What in God's name was he thinking? What kind of a moron would even consider striking a deal with Manehattan's most notorious crime lord?p

>p class="indented double"em"Three."em/p

>p class="indented double"em"Whew, yer breakin' my balls here.

A'right, two, final offer."em/p

>p class="indented double"He gasped, snapping his eyes to the door seconds before it burst open.p

>p class="indented double""We've been made! Somepony sold us out!" cried a brown stallion. "You gotta get out of here! Get out ofâ€" UGH!"p

>p class="indented double"The gunshot thundered into the air, catching the stallion in the neck, soaking his tie and the carpet with a splash of crimson as he tumbled to the floor. The hallway erupted into a hail of fire and lead, ripping the plastered walls to shreds.p

>p class="indented double""Holy scrap!" he cursed as he stumbled to his feet. Keeping his head down, he rushed to the stallion's side and dragged him inside.p

>p class="indented double"Once out of harm's way, he rushed to the door, kicking it shut. "Bucking Hell," he yelled, shielding his eyes from the splinters as the bullets began ripping through the wooden frame.p

>p class="indented double""Hold ya fire! I said hold ya fire ya Numb-Nuts!" a disturbingly familiar hollered from over the gunfire and it came to an abrupt halt. "I'm the one givin' the orders here! Who the fuck told ya palookas to shoot?"p

>p class="indented double"His breaths were deep and ragged, feeling

his heart pounding in his chest. In his line of work, a slipped tongue was like a bucketful of chum and it was only a matter of time before something big, mean and nasty came looking for free lunch. The pages of his mind unfolded like an old leather journal as he ran the name of his employer against every rival gang from here to Gotham. The Maronis? No, too much heat. The Bertinellis? Unlikely, if Frank had a decent pair, they would have ventured out of Starling years ago. The Nostras? Hell, they were bat-shit crazy, but not suicidal.p

>p class="indented double" "I know yer in there ya piece of ass-wipe! This is the M.P.D.C. We got the whole fuckin' place surrounded. So come on out with yer hands up!"p

>p class="indented double" "And then there's that," he groaned. "Cops, Goddamned fracking coppers. Of all the slimy sons of bitches. Why the Hell did it have to be cops?" he cursed under his breath.p

>p class="indented double" "Kidâ€| "p

>p class="indented double" He turned to the stallion on the floor. From the tone of his voice, he was fading fast. The Kid applied pressure to the gaping wound in an effort to stop the bleeding. "Try not to talk. Look, hang in there. We'll get you some help."p

>p class="indented double" The stallion gave a dry laugh. "Heh, niceâ€| one, Kid. I'mâ€| a sucker forâ€| a lottaâ€| thingsâ€| but Iâ€| I sure ain't bornâ€| yesterday," his voice faltering with every word. The stallion's gaze shifted to the bloodstained fedora lying next to him. "My hat."p

>p class="indented double" His eyes trailed to the stallion's hat, catching sight of a small package nestled within. It was about the size of a human fist, wrapped tightly in a black cloth.p

>p class="indented double" "Don'tâ€| beâ€| lateâ€|" were the stallion final words.p

>p class="indented double" The Kid bit his bottom lip. Crying through clenched teeth, he slammed his fist in to the floorboards. He may have been just another goon, and though he was no stranger to death, he would never get used to that sick, twisted feeling in his gut from watching someone die. People romanticize what they do not understand, such as a life in the mob. The money, the women, the fame, which mono wouldn't want that? But truth be told, there was nothing romantic about it. Just a castle of glass built upon broken bones and blood money, ready to come crashing down at any given moment.p

>p class="indented double" "Ya hear me asshole! I said come out with yer fuckin' hands up or we're comin' in after ya!"p

>p class="indented double" Coming to grips that there was nothing he could have done for the sorry sod, he snatched the package and made a dash for the bed. He slipped it into his makeshift backpack before zipping up his jacket up nice and tight. Throwing on his black leather gloves, he then slung the backpack over his shoulder but as he made a grab for his mask, he balked. His gaze narrowed upon his own reflection on the pitch black surface of his aviator goggles as it glared right back at him.p

>p class="indented double" Shutting his eyes, he took a long, deep breath. "Remember why you're doing this. You've come too far, there's no going back now." He grabbed both the mask and the pair of goggles before pulling them over his head.p

>p class="indented double" He crept his way to the door, trying to be as nimble as possible as he snuck a peek through one of the many bullet holes. There were at least a dozen or so beat cops sardined along the entire length of the narrow hallway but his gut was telling him there were more. The M.P.D.C. were like wolves, they hunt in packs and judging by their enthusiasm, they were armed and they were hungry.p

>p class="indented double"What stood out among the sea of navy blue was the stout, middle-aged butterball in the matching grey trench coat and fedora who was two cheeseburgers shy of a heart attack. The Kid scoffed, backing away from the door as he prepping himself on one knee, ready for the run of his life. As much as he respected the honest, hardworking men in uniform, he would gladly see them in a hospital before spending the next twenty years behind bars.p

>p class="indented double"Alright boys, catch me if you can," he said, drawing a smirk behind the black leather mask as he pulled the hood of his jacket over his head.p

>p class="indented double"em"That's heavyâ€| even for him."em/p

>p class="indented double"em"Hey, you know Carmine Falcone. He don't mess around. I'm throwin' you a bone here, Parkerâ€| come on, for old time's sake."em/p

>p class="indented double"em"Alrightâ€| I'm in."em/p

>hr

>p class="indented double"emSeveral hours agoâ€|em/p

>p class="indented double"It was just another sweltering night at the downtown precinct, and even with the windows wide open, the arid summer air lingered with the stale stench of burnt tobacco and cheap whiskey diluting in ice. Even with the tip-taps of fingers dancing upon a seasoned typewriter and a pair of leather Oxfords squeaking upon the polished floors, things were actually calm for a change.p

>p class="indented double"With that new law in town, the phones had been ringing off the hook with countless reports of hate crimes and senseless violence by the local hooligan squad. If that wasn't enough, rumor has it that America's favorite skull-bearing, gun-toting, trigger happy psycho is in town and he's been hunting. So, with unspeakable chaos threatening to bite them in the ass at every turn, even the most hardened of lawmen needed something to take the edge off. Besides, with society going to the dogs, they would have better luck striking gold at the slots than gaining a moment's peace.p

>p class="indented double"emOh, fuck me sideways.em/p

>p class="indented double"Those were the first words to go through his mind as he was jolted from his near comatose state by the incessant ringing reverberating in his ear canals. Between the numbing sensation in his cheek and the crippling migraine gripping his head like vice, he was beginning to regret emptying that last bottle of bourbon. Throughout his career in law enforcement, the only thing that grinded his gears more than those nosy Sallies down at Internal Affairs was pulling the graveyard shift. In fact, he would give anything to be in the comforts of his own Murphy bed with a bottle of gin cradled in his arms at this very moment.p

>p class="indented double"He groaned, keeping his head buried in the crook of his arm while he made a grab for the phone on his desk, knocking a stack of manila files to the floor. Several scattered stationary and crumpled documents later, he finally succeeded in getting the thing to his ear.p

>p class="indented double" "Bullock here and someone had better be dyin' or so help me Godâ€|" he garbled as he scratched his dry scalp. He rubbed his fingers together, disgusted by the oily sensation from the grease that matted his jet black hair.p

>p class="indented double"There was a pause, even though he could clearly make out someone breathing on the other end of the line.p

>p class="indented double" "Look pal, I ain't in the mood for this shit so if this is some kinda sick, fuckin' joke, I'm gonnaâ€|"p

>p class="indented double" "Detective." A refined voice interjected

and from the tone, Harvey could tell it was male and possibly in his mid-forties. "I have received word from a very reliable source that you have been looking for a certain masked individual called the Spider."p

>p class="indented double"Harvey lifted his head, snapping to attention at the mention of the name. "The fuck? Who is this? How the Hell did 'cha get this number?"p

>p class="indented double""Who I am is no concern. All you have to know, all you need to know, is that I am in possession of some rather valuable information. Information which I am willing to part with." Harvey gnarled at the unmistakeable slurp came afterwards. The smug bastard was drinking over the phone and as to what, he could only assume it was as prissy as his accent.p

>p class="indented double""In a few hours from now, the Spider will be making a run for the Aureus. Now, learning from your previous blunders, he would most undoubtedly outrun M.P.D.C's finest, so I would strongly suggest leveraging on the element of surprise. Fortunately for you, I have his exact location."p

>p class="indented double""Heh, ya puttin' me on? Ya think I was born yesterday? The Spider's gone. The guy pulled a Houdini on us and ain't no one's seen him in years!" Harvey hammered his fist on the table, drawing the attention of everyone within earshot of his desk.p

>p class="indented double""Temptation vexes all men, Detective, such as a man with his particular set of skills. Skills certain individuals would pay handsomely for."p

>p class="indented double"The Detective rolled his eyes. "Okay, ya made yer point. So what's the catch, asshole?"p

>p class="indented double""Theâ€| emcatchem, Detective?" the voice asked./p

>p class="indented double""Look I ain't stupid. I know you moochin' types and there's always a fuckin' catch. Well here's the thing pal, I ain't payin' ya shit and I don't care how juicy you thinkâ€""p

>p class="indented double""Why sir, I am appalled by your accusation," the voice interrupted yet again. "There are absolutely no strings attached. I am merely a concerned citizen doing my part to make my city a better place. Now, would you like the location or should I offer my generosity to someone else?"p

>p class="indented double"Harvey swallowed hard as he loosened the coffee-stained tie around his collar. The Spider â€" the elusive transporter who rose to the top of the underworld running contraband for the mob. From what police had gathered over the years, he was good, possibly the best and for some reason he always wore a mask. For every decorated smuck with a badge, booking the Spider would mean the highlight of his career. Which was probably why, for a time, the Spider became Harvey's personal obsession.p

>p class="indented double"Long stakeouts, hours of grilling witnesses, and sting operations one after the other. Yet that slick bastard kept on slipping through his fingers like alimony to his ex-wife. Harvey was already neck deep in hardened shit with Internal Affairs and with his career already on the line, he was in desperate need of a break.p

>p class="indented double""Alright, alright, cool yer fuckin' jets. Ya got my attention, I'm listenin'," he said. Harvey could only imagine the smug grin on the other end of the phone.p

>p class="indented double""You have something to write on, Detective?"p

>p class="indented double"Harvey pulled a grin. "Don't need one."p

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>p class="indented double"Harvey's ebon eyes narrowed at the bullet ridden door while his officers stood with their trigger fingers at the ready. The obsidian finish of their Colt Police Positives clutched tightly in their hands glistened in the amber lights dangling overhead. The Spider was in there: Harvey could feel it in his bones, and after all those years of chasing down a ghost he finally had him right where he wanted. If only those stuck up, no good pricks down at the precinct could see him now. For too long he had been the department's little butt monkey, but no more. He smirked, picturing the look on their faces when he would come waltzing right through those doors with the one and only Spider in chains. Harvey was on a one way ticket to glory town and he was so close, he could almost taste it.p

>p class="indented double""I don't know if you're either deaf or stupid, I said come on out. Ya got nowhere to go, so do us all a Goddamned favor and just give yerself up all quiet-like so we can all go home," Harvey said.p

>p class="indented double"But when his warning went unanswered for the third time, the Detective has had enough.p

>p class="indented double""Alright, wise guy, ya asked fer it," he said. "You," Harvey called to the rookie standing next to him. "Knock that piece of shit door down!"p

>p class="indented double"The officer complied, moving into position as he readied himself by the door. Harvey drew his snub-nosed Detective Special and cocked it. "On my count boys."p

>p class="indented double""Oneâ€¦"p

>p class="indented double"One of the officers bit his bottom lip as sweat beaded upon his brow.p

>p class="indented double""Twoâ€¦"p

>p class="indented double"Harvey took aim.p

>p class="indented double""THRâ€¦"p

>p class="indented double"Before the officer could charge, the door blasted off its hinges as something came crashing through. A muffled cry escaped the officer as he was pinned beneath the weight of the door. The Detective could see his slack-jawed, buggy-eyes reflected on the mirrors of the Spider's eyepiece as both lawman and bounty exchanged glances. In that instance they knew each other.p

>p class="indented double""Oh, fuck! It's him!" one of the officers yelled.p

>p class="indented double"The Spider rushed off the door and leapt into the air. Harvey had yet to regain his composure when the hardened soles of military boots came slamming into his face. He crunched his eyes shut, feeling his neck buckle from the weight as he was stepped over.p

>p class="indented double""Ah, fuck!" he cursed as the Spider grabbed hold on an overhead pipe, swinging past the officers.p

>p class="indented double"As he landed, the two officers at the rear tried to rush him. The Spider grabbed hold of the first officer's hand, spinning around him and tripping him with a kick to the ankle, sending him tumbling to the ground. He dodged the second one and shoved him headfirst into the wall, knocking him out instantly. The hallway then erupted into a hail of gunfire, chipping bits and pieces of plaster off the walls as the Spider disappeared around the next corner.p

>p class="indented double""Get after him you stupid maracas! Lock this piece of shit building down!" The Detective spat to the floorboards in an effort to rid his mouth of the earthy after taste.p

>p class="indented double""I'm gonna kill that motherfucker."p

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>p class="indented double"Parker coughed, cursing the scent of burnt gunpowder growing thick in the air. Bright flashes illuminated the dusky hallway with every shot. He dodged to the side as a pair of oncoming bullets whistled past him. Jumping on the wall-mounted heater, he pushed himself into the air, grabbing the cop by his shoulders. Swinging around, he took the man to the ground. The cop cried as he was slammed hard into the wooden floor.p

>p class="indented double"As the cop lay writhing in pain, Parker zoomed in on the next unfortunate soul. Charging forward, he grabbed the outstretched hand. Closing the distance, he spun into the second cop's arm, turning the man's nose to mush with the butt of his elbow.p

>p class="indented double""Ugh!" the lawman's face contorted as blood poured from his nostrils.p

>p class="indented double"He twisted the officer's arm and kneed him in the gut. The man gagged, puffing his cheeks to keep from emptying his guts all over the floor. Wrenching the gun from the man's hand, Parker flipped him front and over with a twist of his wrist.p

>p class="indented double"He then tossed the gun at the third one as the cop appeared from around the corner, hitting the guy square between the eyes. "Ough! Motherfuâ€"p

>p class="indented double"He dashed forward and leaped onto the nearby windowsill. Pushing himself off, he twisted in midair and kicked the man right in the face. The lawman slammed headfirst into the plastered wall, painting the eroded wallpaper with a blotch of crimson as he slid lifelessly to the ground.p

>p class="indented double"Parker then took off further down the hallway.p

>p class="indented double"His brain was clocked in overdrive and between the burning in his lungs and the pounding against his eardrums, he needed a quick and clean exit. The arrival of the local P.D. was a setback but professionals like him would never go risking their necks without a backup plan. He was right to trust his instincts and source the place out the night before.p

>p class="indented double""Oh, shiâ€" Parker cursed as another cop emerged from the fire escape next to him.p

>p class="indented double"Too late to stop, he crashed into the lawman, knocking the gun from copper's hand and the wind from his lungs. Parker used the cop as leverage, grabbing the man's uniform tightly as they went crashing right through a nearby wall, taking the man to the floor. Gripping the lawman's collar, Parker socked him in the face, breaking his jaw with a loud crack. He took off yet again, leaving the cop groaning in pain amongst the rubble.p

>p class="indented double"The roof was his salvation â€" that much he knew and judging by the hail indescribable garble and cursing filling the hallway, M.C.P.D's finest were right on his tail. Parker bolted through the confines of a living room, doing his best to purge his memory of the nearly naked man in his tacky blue boxer shorts and bathrobe eyeballing him as he darted to the window.p

>p class="indented double"He flung himself against it, smashing right on through and sending pieces of broken wood and glass tumbling to the pavement below. In that split second, he grabbed onto the metal edge of a suspended platform hanging right next to it. The scaffolding squeaked violently against its hinges, swinging him right through another window and straight into the room one floor below. Parker ducked into a roll, hitting the carpeted floor along with the broken shards of glass.p

>p class="indented double""Sorry!" he cried, running past a golden earth pony mare with a blonde mane. She shrieked at the sight of him.p

>p class="indented double"He raced toward the opened door out front just as the unmistakable tip of a Thompson machine gun came into view. Parker gritted his teeth, sprinting forward, he kicked the gun at the barrel and out of the copper's hands.p
>p class="indented double""The fuâ€" OUGH!"p
>p class="indented double"He slammed the butt of his elbow into the man's mouth, busting his lip wide open and roundhoused him in the face. The man's face contorted as he slammed back first against the wall, his body slumping down in an unconscious, bloodied mess.p
>p class="indented double""He's here!" The familiar cock of a gun drew his attention to the two men in uniform armed with machine guns at the end of the hallway.p
>p class="indented double""Frack!" he cursed as they opened fire.p

>p class="indented double"Making a dash for the stairs, he vaulted over the divider. Keeping low as the bullets ripped the walls to shreds and the air grew thick with dust and debris. He fumbled his way up the staircase, seizing his chance while the officers stopped to reload. The loud pounding in his eardrums echoed his racing heart. A cocktail of emotions and adrenaline coursed through his veins as he tore down the next corridor.p
>p class="indented double"He would have to clear two more floors, take a right and then a left. The staircase at the end would take him up to the roof in no time, provided he didn't get shot in the face trying.p
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>p class="indented double""Where the emfuckem is he?" Harvey yelled. "Where the fuck is everyone? Someone tell me what the fuck's going on!"/p
>p class="indented double"The pudgy Detective panted, leaning his weight against the wooden railing by the stairs as sweat drenched his shirt. Gordon may be a nosy prick but it was times like these where Harvey wished that he should have taken the old timer's advice and cut back on his sugar intake. Then again, sometimes a jelly-filled donut or two is as irresistible as a blonde street-side hooker, easy on the eyes and fucking hard to turn down.p
>p class="indented double"The building was in chaos, and between the hailstorm of gunfire and sheer anarchy, the reality of having the Chief tan his hide for his little witch hunt began to set in. The last thing he needed was his ugly mug plastered on every front page in D.C. for tearing up the slums chasing some phantom in a mask. The one thing that kept his hope alive was the untold glory that awaited him once he booked that Goddamned Spider guy a cell in Belle Reve. Heck, they'll practically be bowing in the streets as he walked by.p

>p class="indented double"He then heard a yell from the upper floor. "Over there! He's on the roof!"p
>p class="indented double"Harvey snapped his gaze to the window next to him, curling his lips into a smug grin on recognizing the hooded figure darting across the roof. "Gotcha now, ya cocksuckin' piece of shit!"p
>p class="indented double"He took off in a mad dash up the next flight of stairs, wheezing with every step. With the building locked down and surrounded, Harvey knew that there was no clear path off the roof without a ten story nose dive straight to Hell. So, unless the Spider was secretly the Bird, he had that little nosebleed right where he wanted.p
>p class="indented double""What'ca lookin' at, ya mongo? Get yer ass back inside!" he spat at the poor soul in the hallway. The man jumped as he floundered back inside his apartment, locking the door behind

him.p

>p class="indented double" "I'll get him, even if I have ta black bag that son of a bitch, I'm gonna get him!"p
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>p class="indented double" Parker kicked open the metal door that led to the roof, gaining a sense of well-deserved accomplishment when he finally felt the loose gravel beneath the soles of his boots. Getting up here had been no easy task, especially when he had been forced to put down several more officers on the way up. They were a persistent bunch, keeping on his tail like the bloody hounds of Hell bent on dragging him straight to the Devil's doorstep or worse.p

>p class="indented double" He sprinted across the rooftop, making a beeline for the edge of the building when another cop emerged from the south side entrance to the roof. Leaping on the slab of concrete next to him, the man took the higher ground as he aimed and fired.p

>p class="indented double" Dropping to his knees, he tilting his head back as he slid across the gravel, the brass bullet missing his face by skin of his teeth. At the same time, he grabbed a handful of black sand and hurled at man's face.p

>p class="indented double" "Urgh!" the cop cried, shielding his eyes.p

>p class="indented double" Regaining his footing, Parker roundhoused the officer in the ankles, sweeping the man off his feet and back-first into slab of concrete. "Argh! Fuck, my arm!" the officer screamed, writhing as he clutched his shoulder.p

>p class="indented double" Parker jerked his head back as another gunshot pierced the air, drawing a spark against a nearby girder holding up a giant billboard. He snapped his attention to at least a dozen more officers coming up to the roof. Without a second to spare, he bolted for the edge, leaping off then sliding down the diagonal metal platform at the bottom, rolling across the blackened sand as he hit the ground. Ignoring the rain of bullets all around him, he put his entire focus on the building ahead â€" a good fifteen feet away.p

>p class="indented double" "It's now or never!" he cried as he took off into sprint.p

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>p class="indented double" The officers continued their onslaught of gunfire, feeling their very fingers go numb from the recoil. Though, no matter how many clips and drums they emptied, the Spider had evaded their every shot as if he had eyes on the back of his head. Upon reloading, one of the officers cocked his Thompson and took aim. Just as he was about to pull the trigger, Harvey grabbed hold of his gun.p

>p class="indented double" "The fuck ya lunkheads think yer doin'?' Stop wastin' yer Goddamned bullets!" Harvey snapped.p

>p class="indented double" "But he's getting away, sir!" the officer protested.p

>p class="indented double" "Ya think I'm stupid or some shit? We got him cornered, pinned down. There ain't no fuckin' way off this roof without havin' to go through us!"p

>p class="indented double" "Err, sir? You might wanna see this," said the officer to the far right.p

>p class="indented double" "What're ya yammerin' about?" the Detective narrowed in on the hooded man, now running at full speed down the stretch. Harvey raised an eyebrow. "The fuck does he think he's doin'?"p

>p class="indented double" "Is he gonna do what I think he's gonna do?"p

>p class="indented double" "Yeah, I think he's gonna jump."p
>p class="indented double" Harvey stifled a laugh. "That crazy palooka's got a death wish. There ain't no way he's gonna make that. Alright boys, get yer cuffs out and be ready to wrap this up for Christmas, easy peasy."p
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>p class="indented double" His boots dredged deep into mixture of black sand and pebbles with every stride. His lungs burned as his goggles flogged with every strained breath through the loose stitching that held his mask together. Parker's eyes narrowed intensely at the building before him, keeping his focus on the window one floor below. He couldn't for the life of him remember the last time he was forced to clear such a distance, but if there really was a God up there, he hoped the big guy hadn't taken the day off.p
>p class="indented double" "You can do this! You can do this!" he cried.p
>p class="indented double" The sun had begun to rise, banishing the darkness as the edge drew closer with every step. This was it, the moment of truth. Crying at the top of his lungs, Parker pushed himself off the ledge. He gnashed his teeth together, flailing his arms in midair as the wild howled in his ears.p
>p class="indented double" Then, in that moment, his mind faded to black and in the emptiness of the void, he was reminded of reason he chose the life of a runner. Money and thrills aside, sometimes he lived for moments such as these: moments when the laws of this world held no power over him. It was in that one moment that he was truly free.p
>p class="indented double" Sailing within a foot of the window, Parker crossed his arms, curling his body as he smashed through. He ducked into a roll as he hit the wooden floor, tripping over himself at the last moment. "Whoa!" he cried as he went rolling across the hallway. He finally came to a stop face-down on the ground and gasped for breath, taking a moment to allow the adrenaline to pass.p
>p class="indented double" A few staggered chuckles escaped him at first, growing louder as he rolled on his back. "Oh yeah, I still got it. So why don't you flatfoot sons of bitches pucker up and kiss myâ€"p
>p class="indented double" He heard the unmistakable sound of a twisting doorknob as the door beside him slid wide open. Out popped the head of a little mint green unicorn colt, his magenta eyes lay gazing at the strange, hooded man in a mask now splayed on the floor. The colt shifted his attention to the busted window and then right back at him.p
>p class="indented double" Parker sat up. "Errâ€| remember when your mom told you not to jump on the bed? You might wanna listen to her and uhâ€| eat your vegetables." He jumped to his feet and took off down the hallway.p
>p class="indented double" The colt levitated a carrot to his mouth and snapped a piece off with his teeth, chewing on it as he watched the strange man disappear around the next corner.p
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>p class="indented double" "How the, how did heâ€| Godemdammit!" Harvey yelled at the top of his lungs, throwing his fedora to the ground and stomping on. "That son of a fuckin' whore!"/p
>p class="indented double" "Holy shitâ€|" an officer muttered.p
>p class="indented double" A pregnant pause hung in the air as M.P.D.C's finest were left gawking. Despite their best efforts, the elusive Spider had given them the slip yet again, and by accomplishing a feat one could only describe as amazing. Now they knew for certain all those stories were true and they were right in

the middle of it all. Knowing that the Spider was probably long gone by now, the officers allowed themselves to settle down. Taking a well-deserved breather as they watched the sun's rays illuminate the city skyline.p

>p class="indented double"Detective Bullock massaged his temple as he paced back and forth. "Oh shit, oh shit, shit, shit! I'm so dead, I'm so fuckin' dead!p

>p class="indented double""Detective Bullock!" an officer cried out, emerging from the stairwell and bolting in Harvey's direction.

"Detective Bullock, Sir!"p

>p class="indented double""Alright, alright Harvey, calm down. We'll get through this, we just have to come up with somethin'. Oh, who am I kiddin', Chief is gonna string me up by my balls and beat me like aâ€"p

>p class="indented double""Sir!"p

>p class="indented double""What? What? WHAT?" Harvey cried, staring daggers at the officer who was surprisingly unphased by his outburst. "The fuck ya want, ya fuckin' prick? Can't ya see I'm in the middle of somethin' here?"p

>p class="indented double""I just got off the radio, Sir. It was the Chief," the officer replied.p

>p class="indented double"Harvey ran his hand down his face as he groaned. "Oh fuck me sideways and call me Sally," he grouched. "He's gonna tear me a new asshole for what happened here."p

>p class="indented double""Actually, there's been a shooting downtown and Chief wants all hands on deck." His voice suddenly took a more somber tone. "It's him, Sirâ€" it's the Punisher."p

>p class="indented double"Harvey's face went slack and his irises shrunk to the size of pinheads. "Oh, fuckin' Hell. Cartwright!" he cried.p

>p class="indented double""Yes, sir!" the officer replied, holding his Thompson at the ready.p

>p class="indented double""Get the boys ta tear this fuckin' place apart. Bring me that Spider fuck, or don't bother comin' back at all," he ordered. "As fer the rest of ya, with me." He gestured with a wave of his hand as he made his way toward the stairwell.p

>p class="indented double""Jesus Christ, as if this day couldn't get any worse. Fuck my life."p

>hr

>p class="indented double"Parker knew the alleys of D.C. like the back of his hand. Every street, every junction and pathway there was to know. Always venture off the beaten track, lay low and most important of all, stick to the shadows â€" he followed those words like a mantra and it had been the only thing keeping him alive all these years. He tensed, backing himself into the wall at the sound of ruffling paper and scattered beer bottles.p

>p class="indented double"He dared a peek around the corner, breathing a sigh of relief at the sight of an elderly stallion with a tattered beanie rummaging through an old trash can. Parker would run into the homeless from time to time but they stuck to their side of the fence. Besides, a set of loose lips often came with its own rewards, and by that, he meant a pair of concrete shoes and your very own spot at the bottom of the Potomac. He slipped away unnoticed, leaving the stallion to his own.p

>p class="indented double"He navigated his way through the maze of alleys, picking up the pace with every turn. The most important rule in this business is punctuality. Never be late, not even by a second. Failure to comply often brought dire consequences, and when your credibility comes into question by powerful men who have no qualms taking you apart with a hacksaw, you would be pretty damned sure to

show up on time. Although painful, agonizing failure was the last thing on his mind. In fact, he was more concerned about them slicing his commission in half. Part of the deal should he come up short.p

>p class="indented double"It wasn't long before Parker arrived in front of a red metal door. The Aureus: one of D.C.'s most famous cabaret clubs and the crown jewel of Falcone's empire here in the States. Though, appearances can be deceiving. Everyone knew they ran the joint as a front for their operations. Prostitution, gambling, racketeering, trafficking â€" you name it, they probably had a hoof in it. If there was dirty money to be made, Falcone was already ahead of the game and having an army of crooked cops and corrupt officials was an added plus. He was a little vague on the details, but some things are better left unknown.p

>p class="indented double"He hammered his fist on the red door, and it rang like a Chinese gong. The metallic hatch behind the peephole slid open, revealing a set of deep, crimson eyes glaring right back at him. Parker of course said nothing. It was his policy never to speak during a drop-off and likewise, the less they knew about him the better.p

>p class="indented double""Holy Solaris, hold on a sec," said a gruff voice on the other side as the hatch slid shut. With the clunk of a heavy deadbolt, the door opened inwards, revealing a maroon unicorn stallion with a black mane. Leaning out from the doorway, he took a moment to scan the area.p

>p class="indented double""Were you followed?" the stallion asked.p

>p class="indented double"Once again, he said nothing.p

>p class="indented double"The stallion chuckled, drawing a cocky smirk. "Sorry, that was dumb. Ya know, I bet Bernie here twenty bits that yer weren't gonna show." The stallion gestured to a pecan earth pony standing behind him. "Oh well, easy come, easy go, I guess. Ya got it?"p

>p class="indented double"Parker pulled his backpack across his chest, removing the package in question from within. The stallion then levitated from the palm of his hand, encasing it with an aura of ruby red.p

>p class="indented double""Bernie!" He cried, tossing the package to the earth pony. "Get this to the boss. Tell him it went without a hitch."p

>p class="indented double"The earth pony nodded and left with the package clenched between his teeth as the stallion returned his attention to the masked individual before him. "Well then, a deal's a deal. By the wayâ€"|" the stallion said as his horn lit up with the same crimson aura.p

>p class="indented double"Parker steeled his gaze behind the reflective lenses of his goggles, hooking his finger into the ring of a kunai hidden within the folds of his backpack as he inched it from its holster. This was the part of the transaction he hated most. Nine times out of ten, they would pay their dues without question, but there are times he would end up running for a sleazy piece of crap who refuses to play by the rules.p

>p class="indented double""Carmin Falcone sends his regards," the stallion said.p

>p class="indented double"His body tensed, biting his bottom lip as the blade slipped free but just as Parker thought he would find himself staring down the barrel of a gun, the stallion levitated a brown envelope from behind the door. Sighing, he slid the blade back into its holster and took the envelope in his hand.p

>p class="indented double"At that moment, he froze. Something was

wrong, it felt heavier than usual. Parker opened it to find a stack of Benjamins within but as he tilted the envelope, he felt three golden coins slip onto the palm of his hand and his eyes went wider than the Hudson.p

>p class="indented double""You have got to be shitting me," he mouthed behind his mask.p

>p class="indented double"They were Dorados. He had heard about them, read about them but never in his wildest dreams would he ever thought laying eyes on an actual Dorado. Minted out of pure gold, they bore the regal image of the late King Helios and were highest form of currency to have ever come out of Equestria. Rumor has it, a single gold coin held an equivalent value of a thousand Equestrian bits, which probably explains why they were so rare. He could only imagine how much they would be worth here.p

>p class="indented double""I knew you'd get stuck on that," the stallion said, noticing Parker's awkward silence. "The boss threw in those as a gift. Somethin' 'bout compensation for bein' an inconvenience or some shit like that. I don't know the details but they're yours. Keep 'em." p

>p class="indented double"Parker raised an eyebrow at the stallion's words, and though he remained skeptical of the whole thing, he slipped the coins back into the envelope and tucked it into his bag. Slinging it over, he gave one final nod before bolting down the back alley, vanishing into the shadows.p

>p class="indented double""I don't know 'bout you, Rip, but that guy gives me the willies," Bernie said from behind the door.p

>p class="indented double"Rip chuckled. "Guess that's why they call him the Spider, he creeps you the fuck out."p

>hr

>p class="indented double"The cabaret filled with sounds of boisterous chatter and live music from the colored men playing on their hand-me-down instruments and basking in the spotlight from atop the poorly constructed stage. The slushing of liquid gold rattled a chipped ball of ice against the stained whiskey glass in his hand. Parker was no uptown boy â€" a shady club and a two-penny glass of substandard liquor was all a day's wages could afford him.p

>p class="indented double"He continued swirling the whiskey in his glass, listening to the bell-like tinkle as if brought him a sense of serenity. He never had a taste for the high life. Heck, he couldn't even afford himself a decent childhood, let alone a pair of Bernini shoes. Parker scoffed at the name, well aware of it being one of the many status symbols of those damned spoiled Ivy League brats born with silver spoons stuck up their asses. As to why he would make an effort to remember it, he would never know.p

>p class="indented double"He shrugged at the thought. Was it so wrong to want more out of life? The common man who was unable to dish out a stack full of Benjamins for a gichi' new flat top could at least afford to be jealous from time to time. Not everyone was a Stark, a Gunn, or a Wayne. He took a swig from his glass, lighting his throat on fire as he felt it slide all the way down.p

>p class="indented double"How he hated them. How he despised the privileged few raised behind walls of ivory and polished marble while losers like him had to settle for scraps. Honest, hardworking men toiling in the dirt day in and day out only to end up with a pocket full of loose change. The worst part? They all end up here, in this funky bar, sipping on cheap bourbon and drooling over dog-faced whores way past their prime.p

>p class="indented double""It's just not fair," Parker said to himself as he downed the rest of his glass.p

>p class="indented double""What's not fair, sugar plum?" came a

sultry voice beside him.p

>p class="indented double"Coal-colored eyes shifted to the blonde beside him as a wry grin curled on his face. He wasn't going to lie, from her well-rounded love handles to the curls in her eyelashes and that luscious pink on her lips, she was smoking hot.p

>p class="indented double""My lifeâ€| but then you walked into it and it got me thinking, perhaps it ain't so bad after all," he said.p

>p class="indented double"She curled her blonde hair around her finger. "My, oh, my, aren't ya a smooth talker."p

>p class="indented double""Well, momma always did say I was born with a silver tongue." He leaned in closer. "Wanna see what else I can do with it? I swear, I'm a natural." He clicked his tongue as he winked.p

>p class="indented double"She licked her lips as she smiled. "Well Ah don't have anything else to do tonite soâ€"p

>p class="indented double""Hey, fuckface!" came a rough voice from behind him.p

>p class="indented double"Parker groaned, running a hand down his face. "Oh, are you bucking shitting me?" He turned around, only to come face to face with a well-rounded brute seven feet tall, dressed in a denim jacket with a matching pair of jeans.p

>p class="indented double""Holy, sasquatch," he muttered, craning his neck just so he could make eye contact.p

>p class="indented double""You talking shit to my girl?" The man glared at him as if he was five seconds away from ripping his head right off his shoulders.p

>p class="indented double""Bo! What in tarnation? I told you and Ah were through!" the girl screamed.p

>p class="indented double"Parker put his hands up. "Hey man, look, my bad. I wasn't trying nothing and I sure as heck didn't know she was already with somebody. Sides, if you had kept a better eye on your girl perhaps we wouldn't beâ€"p

>p class="indented double""Ah beg yer pardon?" The girl scowled.p

>p class="indented double""What did'cha say, punk? You callin' my baby girl a whore?"p

>p class="indented double""NO!" Parker cried. "No, God, Jesus, no, I'm just sayingâ€"p

>p class="indented double"Bo's nostrils flared, popping his knuckles like a soda cap as he curled his hand into a fist.p

>p class="indented double""Oh, come on!" was the last thing Parker said as a fist came hurling in his direction.p

>hr

>p class="indented double"He gagged as he felt something hard and heavy hit him square in the face, rudely wrenching him from his sleep. "The guy was unconscious when I got there officer, I swear!" Parker blurted. Though, upon closer examination, he realized it was a school bag of sorts.p

>p class="indented double""Wake up Benjamin Parker, you irresponsible, no good, lousy, git," came a familiar voice from the kitchen.p

>p class="indented double"He licked his lips, silently cursing the arid summer air for parched they felt. Groaning, he massaged his temple as he shook the sleep from his bleary, half-lidded eyes.

"Christ. What time is it?" he asked with a yawn.p

>p class="indented double""What time do you think it is, Dillweed?"p

>p class="indented double"The realization hit him with the force of a freight train. "Oh crap!" he cried, stumbling off the faded cushions

of his couch as he jumped to his feet.p

>p class="indented double"Ben turned to the snowy unicorn filly prepping herself on the kitchen counter as she filled the tea kettle with water from the tap. She shifted her shoulder-length auburn mane to the side with her hoof. She had been flicking her tail against her Cutie Mark â€" a Juniper flower curled around black clef â€" a force of habit when she was either mad or irritated. Despite his sticky situation, Ben had always found it cute.p

>p class="indented double""Look, Juniper, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, I justâ€"p

>p class="indented double""Forgot? Missed it? Got distracted?"

Juniper said. The spite was clear in her voice. "Any of those ring a bell?"p

>p class="indented double""Come on Juni, don't be like that. I said I was sorry."p

>p class="indented double"He jumped at the sound of the kettle slamming against the stove. "Well you should be."p

>p class="indented double"Turning around to face him, she stared daggers at him with her bright emerald eyes. Ben placed a hand on his chest, feeling a cold shiver run down his spine as if she had put a stake through his still-beating heart. "Because of you, I had to walk twelve blocks, by myself, all the way from school. Good thing I had the common sense to take the bus."p

>p class="indented double"The filly returned to the stove, her horn lit ablaze with a soft orange tint as the stove turned itself on.

"You made me a promise that you'd be there, and you broke it. Well, some big brother you turn out to be," she muttered, her ears now lying flat on her head.p

>p class="indented double"He shrugged, rubbing his arm. "Alright, alright, I'm sorry. You're right, there's no excuse for what I did and on my honor, it'll never happen again."p

>p class="indented double"Juniper pouted. "This is the third time, Ben. Do you really think a stupid little apology is gonna make it all better?"p

>p class="indented double"Ben teased her with a grin, prancing his way to the kitchen before leaning over the graphite countertop.

"Well, it's a Friday, so how 'bout I take you down to Miller's tomorrow for breakfast? I know much you love those yummy pancakes of his."p

>p class="indented double"Her ears perked at the mention of Miller's diner. "Make it a full rack, and you got yourself a deal."p

>p class="indented double""Oh come on, that's highway robbery and you know it! Half a rack," Ben retorted with a scrunch on his face.p

>p class="indented double"Juniper scowled. "I want the whole thing, or you can start making your own darn coffee from now on."p

>p class="indented double"Ben pulled a long gasp. "You fiend! Not the coffee! Anything but the coffee! You know I can't live without it. Oh, the humanity." He leaned back, covering his face.p

>p class="indented double"Juniper gave him a leveled stare. "I'm serious, Ben."p

>p class="indented double"He shrugged in defeat. "Alright, alright, you win. Full rack it is. Sheesh, you must be part python or something 'cause you sure know how to squeeze the life outta me."p

>p class="indented double""Oh, come on, you love me for it," Juniper said with a grin. "You know, you're such a jerk. You forget a promise, and here I am making you a Goddamned cup of Joe."p

>p class="indented double""Hey, no one makes it like you do, Hun," Ben replied, winking in her direction.p

>p class="indented double"She chuckled. "Alright, cool your hooves,

Casanova. You'll get your Joe, so long as you don't try to plant a wet one on me like those broads you used to date."p

>p class="indented double"Baby, I'd rather kiss a horse," he said with a smirk, dodging a walnut from the kitchen top as it was magically tossed in his direction. "You missed, by the way."p

>p class="indented double"Jerk." Juniper pouted, returning her attention to the stove with a huff as Ben chuckled.p

>p class="indented double"Juniper Song, the ninth grader, was little rough around the edges but Ben believed that all that under all that snips, snails and puppy dog tails, there was darling sweetheart hidden deep within. When he first arrived in Washington D.C., he had nothing. Not a penny to his name save for the clothes on his back and a fool's hope. Though, when kindness was a virtue denied by his fellow man, a sweet old mare and her grandfoals opened their home to a vagrant with a checkered past and his little brother. They didn't have much but they shared what little they had until Ben found a way back on his feet. Since that day, they had become more than friends. They were family.p

>p class="indented double"Here."p

>p class="indented double"Ben was shaken from his daze the moment he caught a familiar scent emanating from the dull ceramic mug being levitated in front of him. "Hope you choke on it," Juniper said.p

>p class="indented double"Why? Did you poison it?" Ben took the mug in his hand only to dodge yet another rogue walnut. "I'm not cleaning those up, you know," he added as he pointed to the living room.p

>p class="indented double"Go jump off a cliff," Juniper snapped, sitting on her haunches and sipping her Ceylon tea from her own mug clasped between her hooves.p

>p class="indented double"Rolling up red checkered sleeves of his lumberjack shirt, he then brought the mug to his lips, closing his eyes as he took a deep whiff of the rich, thick aroma. He pulled a grin, relishing in the moment as he took a sip from his mug.p

>p class="indented double"Oh, that hits the spot." Ben chapped his lips as he savored the smoky aftertaste.p

>p class="indented double"Sighing, he leaned his back against the stained countertop as he took yet another sip from his mug. It had been hours since he heard the last dump truck pulling its weight across the asphalt, at least it felt like hours. Not that he hated these rare moments of peace. In fact, he could do without the incessant tremors knocking loose whatever was left holding the place together. There was not much to say about the small two bedroom granny house he called a home, but despite its flaws, Ben never complained. In fact, it was luxury compared to the dingy orphanage he left behind. Ben shrugged as he peered into the orphic swirls of foam on the surface of his coffee.p

>p class="indented double"The orphanage was a Godforsaken establishment as stark as a desolate wasteland, and to a ten year old child and his little brother trapped within those soulless concrete walls, it was literally Hell on earth. He swore that his fellow orphans were demon possessed, twisted into rabid animals by overseers who couldn't care less if they had lived or died. So like the little monsters they were, they did whatever they wanted, took whatever they wanted and hurt everyone else in between. Though Ben was no pushover and for both their sakes, he did whatever it took to survive. Through bloody knuckles, broken bones and raw fury, for five long years he braved the fires of Hell and won.p

>p class="indented double"Almost a decade had passed since the day he left the dreary streets of Brooklyn behind him, along with the dark memories from a time in his life he would gladly disremember. Freeing

his mind of morbid thoughts, he pushed himself off before making his way back into the living room, the loose plywood floorboards creaking with every step he took. As he navigated his way through cramped spaces between the ramshackle furniture, he forced a chuckle, fondly recalling just how empty the place used to be. The funny thing about poverty is that it forces a man to be resourceful, and sure enough, there are times that even he ended up surprising himself.p

>p class="indented double"The busted up couch, the cracked coffee table, the banged up shelves, the creaky wooden bed, even the record player some rich sap threw out barely a week ago. They were all his prized possessions, courtesy of the city dump. Ben took another sip from his mug, sighing yet again as he opened his front door, taking comfort in the lukewarm breeze shifting through the grey netting of his screen door. Though, his moment of peace did not last for long.p

>p class="indented double""Ya fuckin' bitch! This was all yer fuckin' fault!"p

>p class="indented double""My fault? You were the asshole that got me pregnant!"p

>p class="indented double"Ben groaned, rolling his eyes at the unpleasant voices of the Buttowskis from next door. Judging by their tone, they were indulging in their favorite pastime. Both man and wife argued so much, Ben was convinced that if they made yelling a national sport, they would be the undisputed champions. His gaze settled on the bickering couple as they shambled out the door and onto to the pavement, throwing on their coats as they stormed past his front lawn.p

>p class="indented double""I told you that good fer nothin' kid's nothin' but trouble! Now I'm gonna have to be pullin' double shifts at the plant to bail him out of the hospital while ya whore around!" Jim said.p

>p class="indented double""Fuck you, Jim!" Delores snapped. p

>p class="indented double"Ben stepped onto his porch as they came into earshot. "Howdy Mister and Missus Buttowski. Can't help but overhear, did something happen to Johnny?"p

>p class="indented double""Go fuck yerself, asshole!" Jim snapped.p

>p class="indented double"Ben blinked for a good couple of seconds before drawing an awkward laugh. "Hah, ha, ha, and a good day to you too, neighbor." The smile soon turned upside down as the Buttowskis vanished further down the sidewalk.p

>p class="indented double""Jackass," he muttered under his breath, taking another sip from his mug as he went back inside.p

>p class="indented double""What was that all about?" Juniper asked from behind the counter.p

>p class="indented double""Hell if I know," Ben said as he made his way to the three-tiered cabinet standing next to him, resting his mug on top of it. "Ain't my side of the fence to be giving a damn, anyway."p

>p class="indented double"Juniper's ears drooped. "Uhm, Ben, can Iâ€| talk to you about something?" she asked, her eyes settled upon the surface of her tea.p

>p class="indented double""Shoot," Ben said, sliding the top drawer open.p

>p class="indented double""You know, Grandma told me not to tell you this butâ€| the bank called earlier this week."p

>p class="indented double"Ben froze.p

>p class="indented double""Ohâ€|" The drawer was half open, but Ben made sure the black leather mask and the pair of goggles remained hidden within.p

>p class="indented double"The old mare did her best to keep her worries to herself, though Ben was no stranger to her financial troubles. She may have a big heart, but like most families, they had their own personal problems to deal with, especially one in the form of an estranged family member. Ben's hand curled into a fist, his muscles tightening at the thought of it, but he had sworn that he would not meddle in that particular affair. She may have gotten by earning a decent wage tending the gardens of lazy, blue collared pricks, but it wasn't enough to keep the banks off her back. Then, three years ago, those corporate vultures had threatened to evict her from her home, their home. So as desperation called for desperate measures, Ben started running for the mob. Now here they were, right back at square one and the sharks were in the water.p

>p class="indented double""I know she said that she'll figure something out butâ€|"

>p class="indented double""Hey," Ben said, catching the young filly's attention as he reached into the drawer and pulled out a brown envelope, keeping it hidden from her line of sight. "If there's one thing I know about Aunt Bluebell, if she says she's got it covered, she's got it covered."p

>p class="indented double""Sides, no matter what." He slid the envelope into the back pocket of his navy blue denim jeans. "You'll always be welcomed here."p

>p class="indented double""But what about Richie?"p

>p class="indented double"Ben crossed his arms. "You leave that ole' sourpuss to me. He won't be too happy 'bout giving up his bed, but after all you guys have done for the both of us, it's the least we could do."p

>p class="indented double"Juniper smiled. "Thanks Ben. I knew we could always count on you." A faint tint of pink blushed on her cheeks.p

>p class="indented double"Ben chuckled at her expression. "Juni, I maybe a hairless, spider monkey but we're family, and that's what families do."p

>p class="indented double""Well thenâ€|"

He shot a glimpse at the clock. "It's five. So why don't go freshen up before your ole' grandma gets here, hmm?"p

>p class="indented double""Alright then." Juniper levitated her mug into the sink. Getting on her hooves, she trotted into the living room. "I'll be in the shower and you better not be a perv' this time, alright?" she said, opening the door next to the cupboard where Ben was standing.p

>p class="indented double""Baby, I'd ratherâ€|"

>p class="indented double"A walnut hit him square in the forehead.p

>p class="indented double"Juniper snickered as she entered the bedroom, shutting the door behind her.p

>p class="indented double"Ben frowned as he rubbed the sore spot on his forehead. "You know, I'm still not cleaning this up!"p

>p class="indented double"His scowl was soon replaced with a smile though. Shaking his head, he made a grab for his mug only to stop mid-way when he heard the rowdy voices of several young men came into earshot, escalating as they approached. Ben turned his attention to the squeaking metal gate as six young men came into view. They sashayed their way in like they owned the place as they made their way down granite pathway leading up to his wooden steps.p

>p class="indented double"Ben growled, grinding his teeth together. "Richie. That no good littleâ€|"

>p class="indented double"They were laughing like a pack of rabid hyenas, exchanging dirty jokes and dimwitted greaser lingo only an

uncultured moron would use. It was an insult to intellect and the very sound of it irritated him to no end. Ben glared daggers at the stupid sod pushing through the screen door who was no other than Richard Parker, his useless bum of a little brother.p

>p class="indented double"To think that Ben had busted his ass working two jobs, six days a week just so he could put that little shit through school and how does he repay him? By getting expelled for smoking pot in the restroom. Despite their circumstances, Richard had never been a bad kid growing up. He had always been the shy, timid kind who loved books as much as he loved reading them. It was only after coming to D.C. that something changed, and to this very day, Ben could never figure out what.p

>p class="indented double""Hey yo, Daddy-O. Come on, gimme five!" Richard said, a foolish smile plastered on his face as he raised his hand in greeting. By the look in his eyes, Ben was certain he had doping again.p

>p class="indented double""Get your freaking hand out of my face, Richie, I ain't in the mood for this crap," Ben snapped.p

>p class="indented double"Richard scowled, sniffing as he rubbed his nose. "Man, why you gotta do that, huh? Why do you always have to be such a freaking nosebleed?"p

>p class="indented double""Why do you gotta be such a Goddamned pain in the patootie? And I thought I told you not to bring any more of your greaser friends into my house."p

>p class="indented double""Oh, your house? Wellâ€| uhâ€| I don't know, if you know, but it's my fucking house too!" Richard cried, slamming his fist on the cupboard.p

>p class="indented double"Ben drew a deep breath as he nodded. "Is that so? Alright then wise guy, who the Hell pays the freaking bills? Who puts food on the Goddamned table and who the Hell bails your freaking ass out of jail when youâ€|p

>p class="indented double""Whoa, whoa, whoa, kill the motor boys," a voice interrupted. "Seriously, what's with all the fireworks? Aren't you guys like brothers or something?" said one of the greasers as he stepped inside.p

>p class="indented double""Hey Richie, nice pad you got here," said another.p

>p class="indented double"Ben eyeballed the rest of them as they entered the living room, on the verge of gagging at how grotesquely stereotypical they were. From the greasy hair, torn denim jeans, faded boots and tacky silver chains that dangled loosely across their waist, they were the perfect depiction of future convicts. Not to mention one was even chewing on a toothpick. Although, tacky wardrobe and atrocious manners aside, there was something terribly off about the lot of them and he felt it. That cold, bitter sensation running the entire length of his spine whenever trouble was never far behind.p

>p class="indented double""Yeah? And who the Hell are you?" Ben asked, sizing the guy up. He figured he was about Richard's age, no older than sixteen.p

>p class="indented double""Oh, the Hell are my manners," he wiped his hand over his jeans before offering it for a shake. "Thompson, Harrison Thompson, but you can call me Blitz."p

>p class="indented double"Ben was hesitant at first but a good gesture deserved another. He took the boy's hand and shook it but never once did he break eye contact. "Ben, Ben Parker, but you can call me sir."p

>p class="indented double"Blitz forced a chuckle. "Ha, ha! You're a funny guy. Hey, Richie," he said, slapping Richard hard on the shoulder. "You never told me your brother's a freakin' comedian. I

like him already."p

>p class="indented double"Richard he shot Ben a nasty glare. "Wish the feeling was mutual."p

>p class="indented double""Yeah, love you too, little bro. Love you like a freaking suicide," Ben replied. "Hey, get your Goddamned feet off the table!" he snapped at the third and fourth greaser who had just popped themselves on the couch, resting their boots on his coffee table.p

>p class="indented double"Blitz placed a hand on Ben's shoulder but quickly removed it when he was greeted with a glare. "Whoa, cool it pops, no reason to get all salty on me. We didn't come here lookin' for trouble, alright?" Blitz said, strutting his way to the center of the living room as Ben's gaze lay fixed on his every move.p

>p class="indented double""Say, Ben, right? You got anythin' to wet the ole Daisy? It's been a long walk." He rested his back against the old record player, removing a comb from his pocket and pushed back on his dirty blonde locks.p

>p class="indented double""Oh, sure. Hey, can I get you boys anything? Coffee? Tea... Arsenic?" Ben asked.p

>p class="indented double""Pfft! Really? Cause I'm thinking something more along the lines of beer. You got any foamers in this rickety ole place?" Blitz asked, the smugness in his voice drove needles into Ben's scalp.p

>p class="indented double"Ben glowered in his direction. "Sorry, fresh out."p

>p class="indented double""Oh, well then, that's too bad," Blitz said. "So how bout you go be a good big brother and go fetch us some, eh? Sides, we can't have a party without any booze now can we?" His eyes narrowing as he sneered.p

>p class="indented double""Hey Blitz, come on man. There ain't nothing here, let's burn," Richard said but Blitz shot him a glare.p

>p class="indented double""Was I talkin' to you?" he asked, sounding more like a threat than an actual question.p

>p class="indented double""No," Richard muttered, adverting his gaze.p

>p class="indented double""Then, shut yer yap."p

>p class="indented double"Blitz then returned his attention to the older brother. "So what'cha you waiting for? Christmas? My lips are chapping here, chop, chop," he said, clapping his hands.p

>p class="indented double"Ben has had enough and he was about two seconds from speaking his mind when the door behind him slid open. "Ben? Is something wrong? I heard voices outside and | oh," Juniper said, in the midst of drying her wet mane with a towel.p

>p class="indented double""Oh, fudgesickles," Ben cursed under his breath.p

>p class="indented double"The entire house went silent and the color faded from Richard's face. Ben's snapped his gaze from greaser to greaser, deducing from the slack jawed look on their faces that things were about to get real ugly, real fast.p

>p class="indented double"He glanced over his shoulder to the white filly behind him. "Juni, remember that thing we talked about?" he asked as Juniper nodded. "Go back inside and lock the door. I'll be with you in a sec, okay?"p

>p class="indented double"Juniper swallowed hard, her tail slipping between her legs as she backed herself into the bedroom. "Alright, stay safe Ben." She shut the door and locked it tight.p

>p class="indented double""Are you emfuckingem kidding me?!" Blitz's voice boomed across the living room as the rest of his posse went into verbal frenzy./p

>p class="indented double" "Yeah, the Hell Richard!"p
>p class="indented double" "The fuck's goin' on?!"p
>p class="indented double" "Blitz, Blitz, listen man, I can explainâ€|" Richard stepped back, backing himself against the wall as he held his hands up in an effort to calm the enraged greaser. By the jitteriness in his voice, Ben could tell that he was mortally terrified.p
>p class="indented double" "Can it, Richie! You were always a fuckin' pussy and now I know why. It's 'cause your fuckin' brother here is a namby, pamby, pony lovin' fag!" Blitz spat.p
>p class="indented double" Ben felt as if someone had just kicked him in the balls. "Whoa, emexcuse meem?"/p
>p class="indented double" "You heard me, you fuckin' fag!" Blitz shot Ben a nasty glare.p
>p class="indented double" Ben shook his head. "Alright, you know what, that's it. You and your boys have overstayed your welcome. Get the Hell out my house now."p
>p class="indented double" "Blitz, please, just empleaseem let it go this one time and let's get the Hell outta here," Richard pleaded./p

>p class="indented double" "I said shut the fuck up!" Blitz yelled, grabbing Richard by the collar and slamming him back first into the wall.p
>p class="indented double" "Argh!"p
>p class="indented double" "Hey!" Ben snarled, lifting a finger in warning at the greaser before him. "You let go of my little brother right now or you'll never hold anything in that hand again."p
>p class="indented double" Blitz cranked his head in Ben's direction with a sneer on his face and released his hold on Richard. "Well, lookie here, boys. Looks like we got ourselves a fuckin' hero," he said to his posse as they snickered. "So, you think you're some kinda hot shot, huh? Do you know who the fuck we are?"p
>p class="indented double" He reached for left side of his jacket and revealed something stitched crudely on the other side of it. Ben had come to recognize the distinctive coat of arms bearing a pair of crossed broadswords behind a skull of pony with a wooden stake driven through the top. The letters H, L and S etched in gold splayed over a red banner. Ben clenched his fists hard, feeling his very blood begin to boil at the sight of it.p
>p class="indented double" "We're the fuckinâ€|"p
>p class="indented double" "Humanity's Last Stand," Ben interrupted, riveting his glare at his brother. "Once this is over, you and Iâ€|" he gestured between them "â€"we're gonna have a long freaking talk, you understand me?"p
>p class="indented double" "You wanna know what the Hell we do to fuckin' heroes like you? Well? Don't 'cha, pal?" Blitz said, a menacing grin curling on his lips.p
>p class="indented double" "Let's get one thing straight here, empalem, I couldn't give a damn about who or what you guys are. In factâ€|" Ben crossed is arms. "â€"you could be hanging from the edge of a Goddamned cliff and all you needed was a damn to save your life, I still wouldn't give you one. So now that I've made myself absolutely clear, why don't you take your little cabana party along with your punk ass and walk right out that door before I take the pleasure of kicking you out myself."/p
>p class="indented double" Once again, the living room erupted into a verbal frenzy as the greasers bombarded Ben with every insult known to man. The rage on Blitz's face had become clear as day. Bloodshot veins webbed across his eyes as he narrowed them to slits.p
>p class="indented double" Ben however, was enjoying the show, his

eyes half-lidded in amusement as he drummed his fingers against his arm. Truth be told, he wanted Blitz to take that first shot. From the moment he first laid eyes on that smug greaser trash, he had been begging for reason to introduce Blitz's face to his sneakers and he was getting tired of waiting for it.p

>p class="indented double"Fuck him up, Blitzy!"p

>p class="indented double" Yeah, show him who's boss!"p

>p class="indented double"Come on Blitz, please, let's just go already!" Richard begged for the last time.p

>p class="indented double"Shut. Your. emFuckingem. Piehole, Richie! And the rest of you guys, cool your fucking jets!" Blitz yelled and just like that, the room went silent. "Youâ€|" he gestured at Ben, drawing a deep breath before continuing./p

>p class="indented double" I have done worse to little shits like you for fuckin' disrespectin' me the way you did but since you're Richie's brother, I'm gonna cut you some slack."p

>p class="indented double" Oh, whoop dee freakin' doo for me." Ben rolled his eyes.p

>p class="indented double" Blitz scoffed. "So, get this, I know how to make all this shit go away."p

>p class="indented double" Hey, I'm up for anything so long as it gets you out my damned door."p

>p class="indented double" I'ma go talk to your little filly friend inside. Once I'm done, we cool," Blitz said as the rest of his posse sniggered, apparently amused at his proposal. Richard however, looked as if his heart had come to a complete stop.p

>p class="indented double" At that moment, Ben's calm demeanor vanished, his eyes going killer red as he glowered at the five leather jacketed hooligans before him. He then stepped in front of the door. "You and your boys aren't going anywhere near her."p

>p class="indented double" What?" Blitz sneered, bobbing his shoulders. "I ain't gonna hurt her or anything. I'm just gonna talk to herâ€|"p

>p class="indented double" Get out emnowem."/p

>p class="indented double" Hey mongo, you deaf? I said I'm was just gonnaâ€|" Blitz took a step forward.p

>p class="indented double" Ben's gaze dropped to the cushioned footrest at his feet and kicked it Blitz's direction, sliding it across the floor and straight into his ankles.p

>p class="indented double" Whoa!" he cried as he doubled over, slamming face-first into the floorboards. "Argh, fark!"p

>p class="indented double" Ben smirked. "Oh, I'm sorry, did I do that?"p

>p class="indented double" Motheremfuckerem!" the greaser snarled, stumbling to his feet, fresh blood streaked from his left nostril over his lip. "You're a fuckin' dead man!" he cried, spitting the blood from his mouth as he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a switchblade./p

>p class="indented double" Ben cringed. "Oh, my God, is that a knife? Is that a real knife?"p

>p class="indented double" The fuck you think? Of course it's real!" Blitz spat.p

>p class="indented double" Oh, no, God, please no." Ben slumped to his knees, putting his hands up in resignation despite the mocking grin on his face. "You've discovered my mortal weakness. It's small knives!"p

>p class="indented double" Richard buried his face in the flat of his palm while the greasers practically smothered themselves to keep from laughing their tops off and risk incurring Blitz's wrath. Their honcho however, was far from amused. "You think that this is funny?

You think I'm hoarsin' around? Well funny guy, let's see if you can still laugh when I carve my name on your fuckin' chest!" Blitz yelled as he rushed the older brother, knife at the ready.p

>p class="indented double"Anything but knivesâ€"p

>p class="indented double"The greaser took a swipe at him. Ben tilted his head back at the last second, the blade missing his throat by an inch. Ben stepped backwards as Blitz swung again, missing as he dodged each and every one of the greaser's swipes. Ben then caught Blitz by the wrist, twisting his own torso and Blitz's arm in one swift movement.p

>p class="indented double"Argh!" the greaser cried.p

>p class="indented double"With Blitz's wrist caught in a vice-like grip, Ben disarmed the greaser, stepping back in, he inverted the knife in his hand and put the blade to Blitz's jugular in one swift movement.p

>p class="indented double"Blitz's black pupils shrunk at the sight of Ben's piercing gaze. Once again, the room went dead silent. The greasers wore the very same expressions they had the moment they laid eyes on Juniper.p

>p class="indented double"Then again, you know what they say about little boys and small knives," Ben said. "Let's do a little recap, shall we? You invite your ass into my house, you insult me and my brother, you threatened my girl, and now you try to pull a fucking knife on me?"p

>p class="indented double"Ben clicked his tongue and shook his head. "Oh, ho, ho, you sure have some mighty big emcojonesem on you pal, I'll give you that, but you just done fucked with the wrong guy."/p

>p class="indented double"Ben shot a glance at the two greasers stacked behind their fearless leader and the other two in front of the couch. He then returned to the one at his mercy. "Please, allow me to show you why."p

>p class="indented double"Ben dropped the knife from his hand, stepping back, he kicked Blitz square in the gut.p

>p class="indented double"Hough!" Blitz's eyes widened to white, half-choking on whatever putrid gunk that had been forced up his esophagus.p

>p class="indented double"Ben stepped forward, curling his fists, he slugged the greaser twice across the jaw. Blitz's face contorted from flaring pain overwhelming his senses before Ben roundhoused him in the head.p

>p class="indented double"Blitz's skull slammed against the plastered wall, smearing a blotch of red across the wallpaper. Ben then twisted around, his back kick catching Blitz in the chest, knocking the air from the greaser's lungs as he was sent stumbling back-first into the arms of his greaser friends.p

>p class="indented double"Ben drew a sharp breath. Rushing forward, he then leapt into the air, twisting around as he kicked Blitz square in the chest. The impact sent as all three of them right through the wooden screen door, smashing it pieces as they tumbled down the wooden steps.p

>p class="indented double"Jesus Christ, what the fuck, man!" Richard cried.p

>p class="indented double"Can it, Richie. Now's not the time!" Ben snapped back.p

>p class="indented double"Son of a bitch!"p

>p class="indented double"A flash of silver reflected in Ben's dark irises as he zoned in on the two greasers by the couch who had ripped out switchblades of their own.p

>p class="indented double"He darted across the living room, vaulting

over the couch as the first greaser took a swipe at him. Ben caught the greaser's arm between his legs, catching him off-guard as he twisted his torso, locking the greaser's elbow.p

>p class="indented double" "Gargh!"p

>p class="indented double" He then ducked into a roll, taking the greaser back-first to the ground with him in one swift movement. Climbing over, Ben took a shot at the greaser's chest, feeling a gut-twisting crack as the guy's ribs shattered from the impact. The greaser cried, clutching his chest.p

>p class="indented double" "You motherfucker, I'll cut your fucking heart out!" the second one growled, slashing the air like a raving lunatic as he charged forward.p

>p class="indented double" Ben pushed himself off the ground as the greaser took a stab in his direction. He blocked it, countering with a fist the greaser's upper lip, busting it wide open. The greaser stumbled backwards, trying to regain his bearings as blood began drenching his lower jaw. He growled through his clenched teeth, he charged with his blade at the ready. This time Ben was ready for him. He caught the arm and turned around. Using his shoulder as a fulcrum, he snapped it in half.p

>p class="double" "Oh, fuck!" Richard cried, cringing at the cry of pure agony filling the room.p

>p class="indented double" Ben swung his elbow back, breaking the greaser's nose on impact. The greaser hobbled on his feet, struggling to breathe as blood caked in his nostrils. Spinning on the balls of his feet, Ben hooked his heel right to the greaser's temple, putting him out like yesterday's garbage. The greaser dropped to his knees and fell face first to the floor.p

>p class="indented double" "Don't you move from that fucking spot or so help me God." He pointed to his brother as he stormed his way outside.p

>p class="indented double" His eyes settled on the three greasers who were still moaning and groaning on the withered carpet grass. "What, that's it? And here I thought that after all that ballsy, tough guy talk, you boys would put up more of a fight. Now look at you, just a bunch of lost puppy dogs, all bark and no Goddamned bite."p

>p class="indented double" "Truth is, you're nothing, nothing. Punk ass little shits who aren't even worth theâ€" Ben scrapped his rubber soles across the wooden platform. "â€"emdirtem, beneath my shoe."/p

>p class="indented double" He started down the stairs, scoffing at Blitz as the greaser spat a glop of blood and saliva onto the grass. "So take from someone who's been around. There are only two places on God's green earth you never, emeverem disrespect a man. In his fucking home and in front of his girl. Unfortunately for you punks, you done fucked up on both accounts."/p

>p class="indented double" His gaze shifted between the two remaining greasers who were picking themselves off the ground, their fists curled at the ready as they glowered at him.p

>p class="indented double" Ben cleared his throat and spat. "Your daddies ain't got the balls to set you boys straight, but guess what? When this is all over, you'd be calling me uncle." He then cracked his neck "So, which one of you sons of bitches should I school first?"p

>p class="indented double" They shot each other a glance as the one on the right lunged forward, throwing a wild haymaker. Ben stopped blow midway, fracturing the greaser's collar bone with a chop to the neck.p

>p class="indented double" "Ough!"p

>p class="indented double" He roundhoused the greaser in the thigh.

Twisting on the balls of his feet, he hooked the back of his ankle to the greaser's face as the greaser spiraled to the grass beneath his feet. Ben dropped down and took a shot at his jaw, dislocating it on the first try. "Argh, fark!"p

>p class="indented double"Ben ducked his head to the right as a blind hook went sailing overhead. Spinning around, he took a shot at the space between the greaser's legs. "Ough, sweet baby!" The greaser hobbled backwards, clutching his groin.p

>p class="indented double"Ben rushed to his feet, kicking the greaser once in the stomach and roundhoused him in the liver. As the greaser flinched from the impact, Ben twisted around and kicked him across the face. The greaser was sent tumbling to the ground, spraying the granite pathway with a blotch of red as a pair of pearly whites went rolling across the granite.p

>p class="indented double"A loud battle cry caught diverted Ben's attention to Blitz who was attempting to tear a two by four block of wood from the handrail leading up the wooden steps.p

>p class="indented double""Oh, come on man! Not myâ€"p

>p class="indented double"The greaser growled, salivating like a savage beast as he tore the piece of cedar free.p

>p class="indented double""â€"damned stairs." His chest heaved as he pulled a deep, staggered breath. "And I just lacquered the thing!"p

>p class="indented double"Clutching it firmly in his hand, Blitz charged like a man possessed, taking swing after swing with Ben dodging each and every one. "I'll kill you, I'll fuckin' kill you, you fuckin' motherfucker!" Blitz screamed as he took another swing.p

>p class="indented double"This time he got lucky, catching Ben right in the chest. Ben choked from the impact, suffocating as he was knocked off balance. Seizing the opportunity, Blitz took another swing. Unable to regain his footing in time, Ben blocked it with his arm.p

>p class="indented double""Urgh!" he cried, feeling a sharp pain lacing through his arm as the piece of wood collided with bone.p

>p class="indented double"Upon noticing the triumphant smirk Blitz's ugly mug, Ben decided that he was done playing.p

>p class="indented double""I'm gonna bust your fuckin' head open and eat your fuckin' brain!"p

>p class="indented double"Blitz took another swing as Ben pulled back at the last minute, the piece of cedar missing the tip of his nose by a good inch.p

>p class="indented double"Ben stepped in, taking a shot at Blitz's solar plexus, feeling the greaser's chest cave from the force of his knuckles.p

>p class="indented double""Ough!" His eyes widened to white as he choked on his own blood, gushing out from between his teeth. With nothing left to lose, the greaser threw a wild swing.p

>p class="indented double"Ben shifted into a solid stance, crying at the top of his lungs as he spun on the balls of his feet, hooking his ankle into the piece of wood in Blitz's hand, splintering it upon impact. The greaser's expression went slack seconds before Ben roundhoused him in the head. There was a sickening crack as his head lashed to the side.p

>p class="indented double"When he was certain the Blitz could no longer tell which way is up, Ben broke into a mad dash. Leaping into the air, he stepped on Blitz's chest, kicking him in the chin as he back flipped. Blitz's head whipped backwards, painting the air with a spray of blotched crimson from his mouth. He moaned, tumbling lifelessly, back-first into the ground just as Ben landed on his

feet.p

>p class="indented double"Ben's breaths were slow and steady, his gaze now locked on Blitz who was now bleeding like roadkill all over his lawn. Making his way to the greaser's side, he took a knee and grabbed him by the collar of his jacket.p

>p class="indented double""I'm only gonna say this once, emonceem. You and your boys stay the fuck away from my family. If I ever catch you cockroaches on my property again, I swear to everything that is holy that your mothers will weep when they see what I've done to you, under-emfucking/em-stand?"/p

>p class="indented double"Blitz swallowed hard and nodded his head.p

>p class="indented double""And now, for the last time, get the fuck off my land," Ben said, getting to his feet. As he started to turn away, he stopped. "Oh, and by the wayâ€" He stomped on Blitz's hand.p

>p class="indented double""Arrrrgh!" Blitz screamed, clutching his broken hand.p

>p class="indented double""â€"that was for my fucking stairs."p

>p class="indented double"Just then, the two other greasers from before came hobbling out of the house, moaning like living dead in the direction of front gate.p

>p class="indented double"Ben made his way to the foot of his staircase, only to find his little brother on the porch making his best impression of a fish out of water.p

>p class="indented double""Youâ€| youâ€| youâ€|" he stammered.p

>p class="indented double""Now, now, no need to thank me, lil' bro. It was my pleasure," Ben said with a smirk, climbing up the stairs as he watched the two greasers stumble past him. "Get your ass outta here!" He kicked one of them in the rear.p

>p class="indented double""You fucking asshole!" Richard yelled.p

>p class="indented double"The older brother's cocky smile vanished, replaced instead with a long, deadpan stare. "And you're welcome by the way."p

>p class="indented double""They're my friends! How could you?"p

>p class="indented double"Ben scoffed. "Friends? You call those damned grease monkeys your friends? They had no respect for you, they had no respect for your home and in case you hadn't notice, Richie, your pal Blitz there just tried to fucking kill me!"p

>p class="indented double""So you went and used your crazy ke-rah-tay on them?"p

>p class="indented double""First of all, it's called karate. Second of all, the fucking H.L.S.? Really, Richie? Is this how I find out my little brother is in bed with a bunch of racist bastards?"p

>p class="indented double"Richard pursed his lips as his eyes began swelling with tears. "Yeah, so the fuck what? I'm old enough to do whatever the Hell I want!"p

>p class="indented double""Hey, I don't know what kind of bullshit these assholes have been shovin' up your noggin, but you don't get to talk to me like that!"p

>p class="indented double""Or what?" Richard got in his face. "Huh? You gonna emschool me like you did them?"p

>p class="indented double""I'm sure as Hell considering it."p

>p class="indented double""Admit it, you call me your lil' brother but you really don't give a fuck," Richard spat. "You're just like them. You're just like mom and dad, counting down the days 'till you can leave me to rot like yesterday's trash!"p

>p class="indented double"Ben snapped. "You, son of a bâ€" he raised his fist, making Richard flinch.p

>p class="indented double"As Ben's feral breaths began to steady, he lifted a finger at Richard. "Don't you ever, emeverem say that again. Everything I've done, everything, since that day had been for us. You and me."/p

>p class="indented double"Richard wiped the tears from his eyes. "Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. By the way, why don't you go check on Juniper? You two deserve each other." Pushing past his brother, he then made his way down the wooden steps.p

>p class="indented double""What the Hell is that supposed to mean?" Ben said as he watched his brother make a beeline for the front gate, storming past the other two greasers who were busy helping Blitz to his feet.p

>p class="indented double""Richie? Richie! Don't you walk away from me! Get your ass back here!" Ben yelled after him, only to have Richard turn around and flip him off as he left with the rest his greaser friends.p

>p class="indented double""The fuck you looking at?" Richard cursed, shoving past a young man dressed a navy blue overcoat.p

>p class="indented double"The young man in question shot Ben an inquisitive gaze as he pointed down the sidewalk. "Err, did I come at a bad time? Cause I can come back."p

>p class="indented double"Ben shrugged. "Hey Jonah, sorry you had to see that."p

>p class="indented double"The young man scoffed. "Jonah? Hey, my mom calls me Jonah. We've been best friends for like what? Five years? Hell, the least you could do is call me J.J." He strutted down the granite path.p

>p class="indented double""Right, J.J., sorry. It's justâ€¦ it's been a really rough day," Ben said.p

>p class="indented double""Tell me 'bout it. So ole Richie's got your gears in a grind again?" J.J. said, taking off his charcoal fedora as he smoothened out the jet black curls from flattop haircut.p

>p class="indented double""Guess you can say that. Well, you know, brothers," Ben said as he massaged the bruise on his arm, flinching from the pain. "Frackles, I'm gonna feel that in the morning."p

>p class="indented double""Actually I don't. I'm an only child. Guess the old lady realized just how much of a pain I was and decided to quit ahead," J.J. said with a laugh. His laugh was coarse, like that of a decrepit old man but Ben never had the heart to tell him that.p

>p class="indented double""Well, he may be a pain in the marble sack but he's still family and you never give up on family," Ben said.p

>p class="indented double"J.J. chuckled. "Wish I could say the same, pal, wish I could say the same."p

>p class="indented double""Juniper! Juniper! Goodness gracious!"p

>p class="indented double"Both men shifted their attention to an old, pale grey unicorn mare rushing down the sidewalk and past Ben's front gate. Her neat bun of moss-colored mane was on the verge of coming undone.p

>p class="indented double""I overheard somepony saying there was a fight!" she cried, dropping a pair of forlorn saddle bags from her back. "Is Juniper alright? Please tell me she's alright!"p

>p class="indented double"Ben rushed down the steps. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down, Aunt Bluebell." He placed a hand on the old unicorn's shoulder. "Juniper's safe, she's inside and she's okay."p

>p class="indented double""Grandma!" Juniper came rushing down the same wooden steps and threw her hooves around the older mare,

nuzzling her lovingly.p

>p class="indented double" "Oh Juniper, sweetheart, thank Solaris!" the old mare hugged her granddaughter close. "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"p

>p class="indented double" "Of course not, grandma. Sides, I got ole' Ben here to kick the living shâ€"snot outta them." She shot him a toothy grin, making him blush.p

>p class="indented double" "Juniper!" Aunt Bluebell snapped.p

>p class="indented double" "Well he did! I saw everything from the window. I mean, you should have seen him Grandma, it was amazing!"p

>p class="indented double" "Yeah, wellâ€|" Ben said, rubbing the back of his head.p

>p class="indented double" "Goodness dear, your arm!" Aunt Bluebell blurted, noticing the blacked bruise just as Ben pulled his sleeve back down.p

>p class="indented double" "It's just a scratch, really, sides this wasn't my first rodeo." Ben gave a nervous smile. He cleared his throat, giving Juniper a quick glance. "So Juni, why don't you go grab your stuff?"p

>p class="indented double" "Oh, right, back in a flash." She rushed back into the house.p

>p class="indented double" "That girl, I swear sometimes she's just like her mother." Aunt Bluebell's ears perked as she noticed the other young man standing beside her. "Oh, hello Jonah, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there."p

>p class="indented double" J.J. laughed, but unlike before, Ben could tell it was forced by how awkward it sounded. "Heya, Missus Bluebell, and that's okay, I'm kinda an easy guy to miss."p

>p class="indented double" Ben stifled a laugh. "Not with that suit."p

>p class="indented double" J.J. furrowed his brow. "What's that supposed to mean?"p

>p class="indented double" "It means you should shoot your tailor," Ben said.p

>p class="indented double" "Well, least I emhaveem a suit, hobo." J.J. smirked./p

>p class="indented double" Ben gave him a leveled stare. "Bitch."p

>p class="indented double" "Jerk," J.J. retorted.p

>p class="indented double" The old unicorn cleared her throat. "By the way, dearie, if memory serves, you mentioned something about an interview today. How did it go?"p

>p class="indented double" "Interview? More like an interrogation. They buttered me up and grilled me like Philly cheese sandwich. I was lucky to get out in one piece!" J.J. cried.p

>p class="indented double" Ben rolled his eyes. It there was one thing Jonah loved, it was making mountains out of molehills, which probably explained his current line of work. J.J. had been an aspiring journalist and with his enthusiasm came his knack for getting into trouble. One day, he pushed his luck a little too far chasing a scoop on the Maroni Family. It was Ben who saved him from a couple of thugs about to chug a vat motor oil down his throat. They've been the chummiest of friends ever since.p

>p class="indented double" "Oh Jonah, if they were foolish enough to turn away a lad as smart as you, it would be their loss. With your exceptional flair, I wouldn't be surprised to see you as Chief Editor someday!" Aunt Bluebell grinned.p

>p class="indented double" "Well, I sure as heck betting on it!" J.J. said, followed by his coarse laugh. "Well, sorry to chat and run, but

I gotta go light myself a stogie before I decide to strangle somebody. Aunt Bluebell." He gave a short bow and made his way across the lawn, fishing a box of matches and freshly wrapped cigar from his coat pocket.p

>p class="indented double"Once Ben was certain his best friend was out of earshot, he took a knee. "Aunt Bluebell, can I talk to you for a sec?" he asked, gesturing her to come closer.p

>p class="indented double"The old unicorn raised an eyebrow. "What is it, dear?" she asked.p

>p class="indented double"When she laid eyes on the brown envelope in his hand, she understood perfectly. "No, no Ben, youâ€| you didn't."p

>p class="indented double"Ben bit his bottom lip. "Aunt Bluebell, it'sâ€| it's not what it seems."p

>p class="indented double""You've been running again, haven't you? You promised meâ€| you made me a promise that you would never go back." Her voice straining with every word.p

>p class="indented double""I knowâ€|" Ben said, tightening his hold on the envelope. "I know what's at stake. I know that every time I put on that mask I put my life on the lineâ€|" he took a deep breath. "â€|but when I heard you over the phone the other day, and I know it was rude to eavesdrop but, I can'tâ€| I mean they were gonna take your home, our home and I couldn't just sit by and let that happen."p

>p class="indented double""I would have found a way, Ben. I've always found a way." She sniffled as she faught back the tears. "What if something had happened to you? How do you think that would have made me feel? How do you think Juniper would have felt knowing that you had died for us?"p

>p class="indented double"Aunt Bluebell caressed his face gently with her hoof. "We love you Ben, with all our hearts. You and Richard mean the world to us."p

>p class="indented double"Ben smiled, leaning into her touch. "I know, and that was why I took the job and I promise. No, I swear, that this will be the last time," he said, handing her the envelope. "Don't do it for me, or you, do it for herâ€| do it for Juniper."p

>p class="indented double"The old mare sighed.p

>p class="indented double""Pleaseâ€|"p

>p class="indented double"Her horn lit up with a green glow, engulfing the envelope as she levitated it into her saddlebag.

"Alright, but this will be the last time, Benjamin Parker, you hear me?"p

>p class="indented double"Ben placed a hand over his chest and grinned. "On my honor, or may I be cut up and made into soup."p

>p class="indented double"Aunt Bluebell chuckled. "Oh Ben, you risk so much to keep our hopes alive." She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Bless you, my boy, bless you."p

>p class="indented double""Alright, I'm ready!" Juniper trotted up to them with her bags packed and ready.p

>p class="indented double""Right, well come along dear," Aunt Bluebell said, saddling her own bags as she made her way to the gate.p

>p class="indented double""Hope you didn't forget anything," Ben said.p

>p class="indented double"Juniper's cheeks flushed. "Wellâ€|" Juniper rubbed her hooves together before giving him a quick peck on the cheek.p

>p class="indented double"Ben's face went slack.p

>p class="indented double""Thanks." She smiled before trotting off

after her grandmother.p

>p class="indented double"Ben chuckled, rubbing the spot where she kissed him.p

>p class="indented double""And don't think I've forgotten 'bout Miller's! It's Saturday, so I'll see you first thing tomorrow!"p

>p class="indented double"His shoulders sagged. "Goddammit."p

>p class="indented double""Well, look at you." Ben's eyes shifted over as J.J.'s voice came into earshot.p

>p class="indented double""When did you become the friendly neighborhood Ben Parker? You know, I really don't get you," J.J. said, taking a final drag from his cheap, homemade cigar before flicking it to the ground. "Why do you always gotta play the hero, huh? Whether it's helping little kittens off trees or kicking some guy's teeth in for robbing an old lady, you're always butting into people's business and what's that get you? A busted arm?"p

>p class="indented double"Ben raised an eyebrow, massaging the bruise on his arm. "It's not about playing hero, J.J., it's about doing what's right. I believe that if I can do something good for someone, then it's my moral obligation to do it."p

>p class="indented double"J.J. gawked at him as if he had heard the most ridiculous statement of the century. "So what? Is it a personal choice of yours?"p

>p class="indented double""Choice?" Ben shook his head. "No, responsibility."p

>p class="indented double"The young man snorted. "You are one crazy putz, Ben Parker, you know that? Heck, if someone told me that you're just some average Joe without a care in the world. I'd feed him a knuckle sandwich and call him a liar," J.J. added with a laugh.p

>p class="indented double"Ben joined him in laughter. "You have no freaking clue."p

>p class="indented double""Oh, and speaking of crazy." He flashed Ben a large smile. "Guess who just got the job at the Washington Post? This mashugana right here!"p

>p class="indented double""Whoa, you serious? Hey, congratulations man!" Ben threw his arms around his best friend. "I mean, oh wow, that's amazing. I can't believe you got in."p

>p class="indented double""Hey, just who do you think I am? This is J. Jonah Jameson you're talking to. Was there ever any there any doubt?" J.J. boasted with a cocky grin plastered on his face.p

>p class="indented double"Ben folded his arms, his eyes half lidded as he gave J.J. a long leveled stare. "When you flunked that interview at the Daily Bugle, you nearly drank yourself to death in my house."p

>p class="indented double""Oh, come on. Why do you gotta do that, huh? Why do you have to keep bringing that up? I was in a very dark place in my life and for the record, I only got drunk once, big deal!"p

>p class="indented double""It was three days!" Ben cried.p

>p class="indented double""You know, you gotta let it go. Sides, tomorrow's a brand new day and I'mâ€"" J.J.'s eyes shot wide open. "Ben, watch out!"p

>p class="indented double""Go fuck yourself you pony lovin' fag!"p

>p class="indented double"Ben dodged his head to the side and caught an empty bottle of Jack over his shoulder. He tilted his head and glowered at one of the greasers from before, forcing a pathetic whimper from guy. Wasting no time, the greaser sprinted away as fast as his legs could carry him.p

>p class="indented double""Hey, asshole! Aren't you forgetting something?" Ben said, turning around as he swung the bottle right

back at him.p

>p class="indented double"The bottle slammed into the greaser's noggin a good fifteen feet away with pinpoint accuracy. "Argh!" the greaser cried as he went crashing into a couple of trash cans.p

>p class="indented double""Punk ass, son of a bitch," Ben cursed.p

>p class="indented double""Geez, I still have no idea how you do that. I mean, you caught that thing without even looking. It's like you got fifth sense or something. Honestly, sometimes it creeps me the Hell out, and don't get me started on your throwing skills," J.J. said.p

>p class="indented double""I guess we all have our gifts. Me, my special senses and my dashing good looks and you, your big, friggin' mouth."p

>p class="indented double""Oh, Hardy, har, har. Word to the wise, stick to being a hero and leave the comedy to professionals, 'kay?" J.J. replied. "Anyways, this calls for a celebration. So, how about we head downtown? There's this new bar I know and I heard the bartender cooks up a wicked brew!"p

>p class="indented double"Ben chuckled. Good ole' J.J., always quick to forget. "You know what, I could use a pint or two. Bleeding those Goddamned grease monkeys sure was hard work and 'sides, it's always a good time with ole' Jonah Jameson around."p

>p class="indented double""Well, if you could call getting us kicked out of Nancy's for flooring that neanderthal a good time, then yeah, I think we both know how to have one Hell of a good time," J.J. said.p

>p class="indented double""Hey, I tried to warn him." Ben bobbed his shoulders.p

>p class="indented double""Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. Now go grab your coat. I'll wait for you outside." J.J. fished out another cigar from his pocket along with his box of matches.p

>p class="indented double""You know, you keep puffing on those death sticks and you're gonna work yourself into an early grave," Ben said as he was making his way up the stairs.p

>p class="indented double"J.J. scoffed. "Please, I could smoke a thousand of these and I'd be seeing the undertaker put you in the ground long before he does me!"p

>p class="indented double""Oh and by the wayâ€¦ you're buying," Ben said.p

>p class="indented double""Asshole." J.J. struck a match and lit his cigar.p

>p class="indented double""Bitch."p

>p class="indented double""Jerk."p

>centerstrong[To Be Continuedâ€¦]strong/center

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file.